Witchblade: Lost Generation

Chapter 1: Origin

1.

As the sun began its slow descent toward the western horizon, a breeze carrying the faint scent of the southern islands drifted in, and a thought rose unbidden to my mind.

“Oh—right. The harvest festival this year… I wonder if I’ll be able to go.”

Kiseto Tomoyuki, who had come to visit me at the rehabilitation center, said it with genuine regret, his expression free of pretense. There was something unmistakably southern about him—open, warm, and unguarded.

The vivid colors of the festival bloomed in my imagination. I pushed myself upright in bed, and even Miyazono Yuri—usually so adept at concealing her feelings—could not entirely hide the shadow of disappointment that crossed her face.

“I felt fine until I got home from school,” I said. “But after the examination earlier, the doctor told me I shouldn’t go out again today.”

“So it’s really no good, huh…” he murmured. “You promised, you know. Honestly…”

When the pajama-clad girl voiced her complaint, Tomoyuki didn’t bristle or argue. Instead, his cheeks flushed faintly red, and he scratched the back of his head, shaking it from side to side in quiet embarrassment.

“Don’t be upset. You’re sick, Yuri. There’s nothing we can do.”

Still, the disappointment lingered. I forced a small smile.

“Then I’ll definitely go to next month’s Niraikanai Festival.”

The Niraikanai Festival was held on Zamami Island, about thirty kilometers west of Okinawa’s main island. It was a celebration of abundance, when the five grains were gathered in rich harvest and prayers were offered to the gods. The festival took place every year on the night of the July full moon, and again during the Obon season in August.

In the Okinawan dialect, Niraikanai referred to the paradise beyond the sea where the gods were said to dwell. On Zamami, it was believed to be the place from which children came into the world, and to which the dead returned. For that reason, the festival during Obon served both as a memorial for the departed and as a prayer for

safe childbirth—and, quietly, as a wish that one's own passing might someday be gentle, carried peacefully by the sea gods.

"It's during summer vacation," my mother had said, sending me off in a yukata. "If you take care of yourself and do your best, you should be able to go."

Truthfully, I had planned to wear one today as well—but—

"Hey," Tomoyuki said lightly, "let me see you in a yukata sometime."

Dressed in a hospital gown, I couldn't help smiling wryly at how perfectly the image suited him. His sun-bronzed skin and gentle features, his teeth flashing white when he smiled, made him look as though he truly belonged to the sea. Helping his fisherman father while commuting between high school and home, he had grown into a sturdy, healthy boy—the very image of a child of Zamami.

Because I couldn't easily go outside, the stark contrast between day and night in the southern islands—where I had already lived for ten years—stood out all the more vividly, and the loneliness it stirred crept quietly into my chest.

"Then next year's harvest festival," he said. "We'll go together for sure. The Niraikanai Festival isn't going anywhere."

At the words "next year", a sharp pain tightened in my chest. I laughed it off lightly, but the ache lingered.

If only I could leave the sanatorium, mount a bicycle, and ride away—putting steady distance between myself and Tomoyuki. Swallowing my loneliness, I watched his figure recede.

"Next year… I wonder if I'll even still be here."

The small sanatorium on Zamami Island stood slightly apart from the village, near a cliff overlooking the sea. It was a simple, single-story building, its white walls crowned with traditional Okinawan red tiles.

When the windows were opened, the scent of salt drifted in on the sea breeze. There were no houses nearby—only nature, quiet and expansive, inviting one to breathe deeply and feel at ease. Cars passed only rarely, and the air was strikingly clean.

Perhaps because of that isolation, the facility accepted no more than a dozen patients at a time, and only those who truly wished to be there were allowed to stay.

Perhaps it was because she had been raised amid such generous, sheltering nature. Yuri had always been robust, brimming with quiet vitality—at least, she had been while she lived in Tokyo.

But over the past several months, her strength had unmistakably begun to fail her. Despite having gained admission to the same medical school as Tomoyuki, she found herself unable to attend even half of her classes that term.

Her doctors and her parents, of course, understood the course her illness was taking, yet they chose not to tell her. Instead, they offered gentle reassurances—You'll be all right soon, they said, smiling. Even so, Yuri had lately begun to sense, without certainty but with growing unease, that her remaining time might be far shorter than she had once imagined. No one could bring themselves to speak such words aloud. Everyone merely encouraged her with soft smiles.

Her parents had devoted their lives to their work, and Tomoyuki had come all the way from Tokyo expressly for her sake. That alone was enough for Yuri to understand how deeply she was loved, how much she was worried over. And yet, beyond that, being asked to keep her spirits up—to remain hopeful—was, in truth, unbearably hard.

As night fell, the distant sounds of festival drums and mingled voices drifted faintly to her ears. It seemed the annual celebration was nearing its height. Strangely, the liveliness seeping into her room only deepened the ache in her chest.

Within her, something throbbed and stirred, as though a tide were slowly rising, threatening to overflow. The doctor had told her to stay calm, not to strain herself. But today, unlike other days, no attack had come, and so she allowed herself—just a little—to listen closely to her own body.

If she were able to go, Yuri would, of course, have liked to take part in the festival. It was not as though she had never seen it before. She had long hoped that she might at least watch it once more, and this year she had even resolved to try. But in the end, her attending physician gently shook his head. In years past, she had managed to catch a glimpse of it, however brief; this time, even that was denied her. And so, she resigned herself to experiencing the festival only as a distant presence, something felt rather than seen.

She had heard countless stories about the Harvest Festival and the Nirai Kanai Festival from Tomoyuki, and he had shown her photographs as well. Still, she could not suppress the quiet longing to witness it with her own eyes just once. That wish, however, was one she had no choice but to set aside.

She felt that if she were able to attend the festival, she might grow closer to the people of the island, might come to know them more intimately. Watanajima, an island with a circumference of roughly twenty-five kilometers, was home to fewer than a thousand people. It was a small island, and travel to and from Okinawa's main island was inconvenient—there were only two boat services a day. Children studied on the island only through junior high school; each grade numbered no more than ten students, and more than half eventually advanced to high schools on the mainland, leaving the island behind.

The terrain of the island was largely hilly, with few areas where people could gather and live in larger numbers. Most settlements were concentrated on the flatlands in the southeast. To the west stretched a wide plain, but before the war it had served as an airfield for the Imperial Japanese Army, and now it was used as a U.S. Marine Corps training facility known as Camp Tazuna. That presence, too, was one of the factors that kept the island inward-looking, inclined toward isolation.

The illness did not progress violently or abruptly. Instead, like the transparent, vividly beautiful sea stretching out before her eyes, it advanced quietly and without spectacle. Nature here was rich and abundant, yet under these conditions, life itself was never easy. Still, the island's festivals—especially the Harvest Festival and the Nirai Kanai Festival—were held several times a year, and through them the islanders formed bonds as warm and close-knit as family.

Even the girls who lived quietly, somewhat apart from the bustle of the village, were embraced by that warmth. On days when she felt well enough to go to school or wander outside, people would always greet her kindly, calling out with concern or encouragement. Such gentleness seemed to come naturally to the islanders.

Tomoyuki, too, had been attached to her since she was a child, always watching over her, always offering reassurance. Wrapped in that warmth, she had grown up believing it only natural that she should be loved this way. Perhaps that was why, even now, she had not fully grasped what it meant to become one of the island's people herself.

She had never once taken part in the islanders' collective festivals. Though she had been invited before, she had always declined. Yet now, for the first time, she found herself thinking that she would like to join them—just once—and to feel, in earnest, that she truly belonged.

It was a thought that came too late. She slipped out of her pajamas and changed into a simple white dress. There was no longer any need to conserve her strength for the day ahead.

With a pouch of medicine tucked close to her body, she slipped out of her room. Careful not to draw the attention of the other residents, she crept outside and made her way toward the square.

The sanatorium, by design, was open to the outside world, its purpose bound up with fresh air and freedom of movement, so coming and going was not strictly regulated. Even so, there was always the risk of encountering a nurse on duty—or crossing paths with someone else. The streetlamps cast only a feeble glow, leaving wide stretches swallowed by darkness, but that suited her well enough. Shadows were plentiful, and she could pass unseen.

Moonlight spilled across the ground, illuminating her steps. She set off at an unhurried pace. Though urgency pressed at her heart, her illness denied her the luxury of haste. If she pushed herself too hard, an attack might strike, leaving her collapsed where she stood.

There were two ways to reach the settlement. One was a broad road that wound through the forest in a long detour, skirting the coastline. The other was a narrow path—a shortcut that cut straight through the woods. She chose the latter, turning onto a side trail that branched away from the forest road. The slope was neither steep nor descending, and for the moment, her body seemed willing enough to carry her onward.

What she had not anticipated was how completely the moonlight would fail her in the forest's depths. Darkness closed in from every direction, thick and oppressive. Even for someone accustomed to these paths, it was difficult going. In places the road was little more than a suggestion, poorly laid and uneven, making each step uncertain.

She had gone only a short distance when she reached a point where the path dipped partway down. Suddenly, without warning, a sharp constriction seized her chest. The girl stopped, breath caught, her body betraying her once again.

This is bad… this is really bad…

She had already been warned more times than she could count to take it easy. Looking back, perhaps she had been pushing herself too hard. Nighttime, after all—didn't that alone demand more caution than usual? Or perhaps today's exertions had simply been too much. Either way, she could no longer deny it.

The girl grimaced, enduring the pain as she fumbled for the small bottle of medicine tucked into her pouch. Illness-induced attacks could strike anytime, anywhere; there was no way to predict them. She tried to swallow the pills at once.

At that moment, a sudden, violent pain tore through her chest.

“Ugh—”

A cry slipped from her lips, and without thinking she clutched her chest, losing her balance. The jolt sent the little bottle of medicine flying from her hand. It struck the ground, rolled, and spun across the dirt.

“No—!”

She reached out instinctively, but it was too late. The cylindrical container tumbled down the slope faster than she could ever catch it.

The small bottle disappeared into the darkness, swallowed by the shadows of the forest.

She had never imagined she might drop it.

That medicine—it was the only bottle she had brought with her.

“Ha… ha… ngh… ngh… this hurts… it hurts—!”

The pain was nothing like before. It surged upward, crushing and suffocating, and she could no longer summon the strength to suppress the attack. Her chest felt as though it were being torn apart from within, the agony spreading gradually through her entire body. Even breathing became difficult.

If I collapse here… no one will notice. No one will come.

She was not on a path meant for patients. This was a shortcut—one meant only for those healthy enough to use it. Even if she fell, there would be no help. The thought struck her with terrifying clarity.

She tried to take another step forward, but the pain was too intense. Her balance gave way, and she crumpled where she stood.

She wanted to cry out for help, but the suffering was too great for her voice to form. She could not call anyone’s name. No one would notice her anyway.

Am I… going to die? Here…?

She knew her life was not meant to be long. She had understood that much. And yet—there were still things she had not done. The harvest festival, the firefly festival—she had not seen either. Let alone fulfilling her promises with Chigi-kun.

To lose her life without knowing anything, without accomplishing anything—she could not accept it. And yet, even if she lived, she could not go on living like this forever.

She raised her face weakly. Between the trees of the forest, the night sea's glow spilled through. Beneath a sky thick with stars, the distant shimmer of the ocean contrasted cruelly with the girl's pain, its gentle radiance burning itself into her fading cognizance.

…But that sound, which seemed to wrap everything up and gently carry it away, now felt as though it were leading me into another world—to death. Like a death god's lullaby.

"…Please, someone help me… I don't want to die yet!"

Yet I had no idea who I was begging, or what I was begging for. My consciousness was growing faint, and I could no longer tell anything for myself.

And then, at that moment—

As if in response, the sea and the sky moved.

The stars that had been shining so beautifully only moments before suddenly began to vanish, swallowed up by darkness spreading across the heavens. Thick black clouds surged forth, as though to blot out the sky entirely. The wind grew stronger, and the sea began to rage violently. The white spray thrown up by the waves turned the seascape into something that looked, for all the world, like a typhoon bearing down upon us.

What was happening?

Within a hazy, confused mind, Yuri continued to gaze at that scene with calm composure. And then—

A dazzling light fell from the sky into the sea, and thunder rolled, echoing all around.

Bathed in the glow of lightning, something slowly began to rise from within the ocean.

At first, it looked like the tip of a sword emerging from the waves.

But what appeared was not a weapon.

It was an arm!

There was no flesh, no skin—only bare bone, exposed just as it was. Around the wrist, something like a bracelet gleamed like flashing sliver in the thunder's roar. Set into the hand was a red jewel, shining with an eerie, unsettling light."

However, because it was revealing itself from afar, the gauntlet's form appeared distinct to Yuri. Or rather, it would be more accurate to say that its image was being transmitted directly into her mind.

It was not simply that she could “see” it. Even from nearly a kilometer away at sea, she could clearly grasp its shape. And yet, when it came to objects of that size, normally she should only have been able to make them out as vague, grain-like specks. But somehow, it felt as though she were viewing it through a powerful telescope lens—its contours rendered in sharp detail.

Even so, despite the distance, the red jewel gleamed as vividly as if it were right before her eyes, and she could feel its presence reaching her.

At that moment, within Yuri’s chest, a strange sensation welled up. It felt as though something deep inside her body was being stirred. It was entirely different from the rhythm of her own heartbeat.

In response, the jewel set into the gauntlet also began to pulse—brightening, dimming—over and over again.

That gauntlet… it’s alive…

That intuition pierced straight through the girl’s heart.

The unfamiliar throbbing gradually overlapped with the beating of Yuri’s own heart. It was as though the two were beginning to synchronize—slowly, inexorably—until it felt as if they might become one.

Clothed in lightning, the gauntlet radiated an uncanny atmosphere—one in which divinity and blasphemy seemed to intermingle—as it floated above the surface of the sea.

Now, the girl had no strength left to flee from where she lay.

In that instant, Yuri’s heartbeat and the gauntlet’s mysterious pulse aligned perfectly.

As though drawn by the pull of a powerful magnet, the gauntlet that had been levitating above the sea bolted towards the girl.

It slipped effortlessly through the gaps between the waves, closing the distance in an instant, and from the red jewel glowing upon the back of the hand, a vivid crimson gauntlet emerged, clutching tightly.

The crimson touch seized Yuri’s entire body in a flash, binding her so tightly that she could not move a single muscle.

Then, as if guided by that grasp, an inhuman hand appeared before her eyes.

From within the gauntlet, a short blade thrust forth.

It's going to stab me—

The moment that thought crossed her mind, the blade pierced straight into the girl's body.

"Ah—ahhh—ahhh—ahhh—ahhhh!"

An agony more intense than anything she had ever known tore through her entire being, driving all other sensation away. Yuri screamed uncontrollably.

And yet, for some reason, the blade did not tear through her flesh.

Instead, as though being swallowed, her body was drawn in—slurp—along with the blade itself.

Yuri did not even have time to question what was happening. She let out a final, pitiful cry, and her body vanished completely.

Thoughts started pouring in.

Along with them came the sense that something was flowing into Yuri's head—a subconscious presence alien to her own.

No, perhaps it wasn't so different after all. It might simply have been a collection of information she had never known before.

What is this…?

Witch… Blade?

Before she could even begin to think about what it meant, something snapped inside Yuri.

As if a shell had been shattered from within her body, an inexplicable power detonated inside her, surging up from the depths of her being.

She had never felt anything like it before.

A strange exhilaration welled up from deep inside her body.

"Ah—! So amazing…!"

For an instant, her mind went completely blank, and the girl's consciousness was abruptly cut off.

2.

At the time, Yuri had left the sanatorium intending to go see the Harvest Festival.

On the western side of Watanabe Island, at a U.S. Marine Corps training facility known as Camp Tsunami, a certain experiment was being conducted…

All the lights were extinguished, leaving only the glow of the full moon to illuminate the surroundings.

Within the facility, a single shadow moved swiftly through the forest.

The mounted gun tracked the movement with its sensors and unleashed a deafening burst of gunfire.

Bullets tore through the air, grazing the target and spraying sparks from the muzzle as they closed in.

And then—

All five fingers transformed into blades forged of some special alloy. The right arm struck the gun mount in a single blow.

The pedestal shattered instantly, splitting apart and exploding on the spot.

The figure moved along the slide path several dozen meters ahead.

It didn't seem to have taken a single hit.

Was it even human?

Standing roughly with a height of 180 cm, its body—judging by appearance alone—was wrapped in thick muscle, like that of a professional wrestler or a bodybuilder.

No… calling it "human" felt inaccurate.

It would be more fitting to describe it as an irrational beast.

Its forearms were sheathed in metal, and from the fingers of both hands extended ten sharp blades, which caught the moonlight and reflected it along with the flicker of explosions.

"Test: all clear.

No damage to Neural Gear No. 3.

All data within normal parameters."

A soldier monitoring the instruments inside the facility relayed the report to the blond-haired man standing behind him.

From the command center at the U.S. Marine Corps camp, Major Michael Fines watched the image on the monitor and let out a satisfied smile.

To take a sentry gun head-on and emerge completely unscathed—

This confirmed that the combat capabilities of Neural Gear No. 3 functioned even at night.

Granted, it wasn't a fair test to begin with. A normal human would never be able to slip through the barrage of an automated pursuit-type machine gun without suffering even a single injury.

And yet—

Not only had it done so with ease, it had also completely destroyed all five targets.

With results like these, there was nothing left to hope for.

"This concludes today's experiment. Issue the return command to No. 3."

At Michael's order, a soldier tapped at the keyboard.

Inside Neural Gear's brain, a control chip was embedded. By receiving commands transmitted from the base, it controlled all of its actions.

Neural Gear No. 3 would soon make its way back to the warehouse.

At that moment, whether by coincidence or fate, dark clouds slid across the sky and briefly swallowed the full moon.

For the sake of the experiment, the lights had been extinguished—and now, in an instant, the surroundings were plunged into darkness.

Beyond the facility lay a wide, flat expanse—once a Japanese military airfield during the Pacific War.

A powerful wind swept across the plain, and thunder rumbled in the distance.

It began suddenly.

A strange gust swept through the area, then vanished without warning. The thunderclouds dispersed as if they had never existed.

"What was that just now? It wasn't a squall. Clouds like that don't just spread out… whatever. Get Unit Three into the facility at once."

Michael snapped back to attention and issued orders. But Unit Three stood motionless, as though its power had been cut, slowly scanning its surroundings.

"What is Unit Three doing?"

Unease surged through Michael. This was something entirely new.

“What’s happening?” a soldier shouted. “Sir, the pilot has boarded Unit Three!”

The command module was forced into the forward entry port. There was no sense of synchronization—until the monitor flared to life. Unit Three’s eyes went feral.

Blood streamed from them. Its face looked starved, like a beast long deprived of prey. Saliva spilled from its mouth as it deeply inhaled, savoring a long-missed scent.

“Gyao-oooh!”

With a thunderous roar, it turned away from the facility—toward the fence.

It began to run—straight ahead, without hesitation.

“Stop it! Someone stop Unit Three!”

No order, no command reached it.

“Damn it… it’s not responding at all!”

Unit Three had vanished completely from the monitors. Control was lost.

With a scream that sounded almost like laughter, Unit Three leapt forward. It cleared the fence surrounding the test site with ease. The barrier stood nearly ten meters high—far beyond what an ordinary human body could surmount. But with Unit Three’s jumping power, it was no obstacle. If it reached a populated area, the damage would be catastrophic.

The experiments with Neural Jars and Berserk Units had been conducted under Michael’s judgment. The Japanese Self-Defense Force headquarters at Okinawa, of course, was unaware of the existence of the Evas. At this stage, that secrecy still held—but once this incident came to light, Michael would be held accountable.

“This is an emergency! Issue the base-wide command at once!”

“Find Unit Three immediately and secure it!”

“Sound the sirens! Notify the entire camp—Code Red!”

Alarms wailed throughout the facility.

3.

By then, almost nothing of Unit Three’s rationality remained. It should once have been human—but now it no longer was. Normally, it would be restrained by the control chip, forced to follow orders and focus solely on defeating enemies.

But this was different.

Some powerful presence was stirring—an overwhelming impulse rising from deep within its body, spilling beyond the control chip's commands. The being known as "Unit Three" was acting on instinct alone.

It possessed no capacity for thought—only a drive to move forward.

Vaulting over the fence, it charged blindly toward the forest ahead. There, hidden among the trees, was a narrow road. Lying collapsed along it was a girl in a white dress, crumpled as if she had fainted.

Had she lost consciousness?

The moment Unit Three saw her, an alien excitement surged within it, climbing sharply, beyond restraint.

"Blood… *carve* it up… tear it apart…"

It had not used that word in a long time. It had nearly forgotten it, yet now, as those words left its mouth, it felt perfectly natural. Before it, the girl was lying helplessly and vulnerable, which filled Unit Three with a brutally twisted feeling of desire. To call it an "ordinary assault" did not seem right—but, at this moment, the word *carve* was perfect.

That line of thought was disturbingly close to that of a sadistic killer. Its mind was filled with cruel jubilance. How much excitement could it extract from this slender, wire-thin girl? The capacity to reason in this manner was not something a neural network possessed. Yet, somehow, its heart and body were acting as one.

The blade in his right hand could no longer be stopped. His ten fingers clicked sharply against one another as he advanced, step by step, toward the girl.

At that instant, the bracelet fastened around her wrist began to glow more intensely, its crimson light gleaming. Sensing something ominous without understanding what it was, the girl felt uneasy—and thought of Witchblade.

Then she opened her eyes. As if being pulled upward from below, her body slowly rose. She thrust her chest forward toward the neural network, a seductive, almost taunting smile spreading across her face. Unit Three's desire for her intensified yet again.

In a single thought—*carve, carve, carve*.

She thought Witchblade might unsheath a blade, but it did not.

Instead, the red jewel set at the center of the bracelet shined brighter, until its light enveloped the girl's entire body.

Suddenly, an explosion erupted with the girl at its center, blasting the surrounding trees outward in a perfect circle. A shockwave of overwhelming physical force sent the neural network flying through the air.

There stood a single woman. Her purple hair gleamed, her eyes shone gold, and her skin had the pale, hardened sheen of an insect's carapace. Her body was wrapped in something like a protector—white, dress-like armor.

Just moments before, the girl standing there had been a frail-looking black-haired child, so delicate she seemed incapable of inspiring any vivid image at all. But after undergoing her transformation, she now gazed coldly at the cyborg standing before her.

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Around that time, Kise Tomoyuki had been participating in the Bon Festival dance with two male classmates and a girl from Toyonari High School. It was summer, and it was the season when people knew to gather by the sea. There were only four of them from the village's inner district, and none of them were particularly close. Old and young alike joined the dancing without distinction, swaying together to the rhythm of the festival music.

"Hey?"

"What is it?"

"Did you hear that just now?"

"What?"

The boy who had been dancing suddenly stopped, lifted his head, and cast his eyes toward the forest.

"…Ah. Just now, didn't it sound like something echoed from over there…?"

"Yeah, earlier too—there was a sudden boom, like thunder rolling."

"And on top of that, that girl we care about—don't you think something's off?"

Even as they spoke, irritation flared in Tomoyuki Kise's chest. He didn't quite know why, but the feeling made him uneasy. Being told something like that only made his irritation grow hotter. Still, he couldn't bring himself to voice his anger outright.

Well, whatever, he told himself. There's no reason to worry. That childish little girl isn't even here—no point in regretting it now. If it bothers me that much, I can always go check on her later at the clinic.

Trying to reassure himself, Tomoyuki answered, "Yeah, probably," while an unshakable anxiety lingered in his heart. He stopped dancing and turned his gaze toward the forest once more.

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"Gyaaaah! Carve, carve, carve!"

Neural Network No. 3 howled with excitement, raising its voice as it brought down the five blades fitted in place of its left-hand fingers. It swung them down toward the transformed girl with deliberate force.

It was convinced that this would bring the exquisite pleasure of carving flesh and tearing through muscle.

However, she caught the blade—wrought from a special alloy capable of cleaving through a tank's composite armor—with her left arm as though it were nothing more than a twig.

What, exactly, was she made of? Even the edge of Unit Three's sword had failed to leave so much as a scratch on the girl's Protector. The blow had been completely nullified.

And more than that—she did not so much as flinch under the full force of the strike. How could such astonishing strength lie hidden within so slender and elegant a frame?

A faint smile curved the girl's lips.

Heh… what tremendous power. It's overflowing… Perhaps I shouldn't hold back anymore.

Her smile deepened. From her right arm, a longsword slid into view. At the same time, the horned machine mounted above her head and swept its mechanized arm down in a razor-sharp arc, as if attempting to slice through paper.

Its mechanized arm had long since lost the capacity for pain, but even through dulled sensation it instantly registered the loss of one of its weapons.

Then the girl's pale hair transformed—each strand hardening into a keen blade. Countless edges flashed as they surged toward her opponent.

Unit Three sprang backward, retreating in a nimble, almost instinctive motion. It was less calculation than animal reflex; encased head to toe in armor, it relied on raw survival instinct to evade the assault.

Even so, it could not avoid every strike. A single crimson blade slipped past its guard and grazed its abdomen, carving a shallow wound. Blood welled up and began to trickle down.

"…Huh. So red does come out," she murmured, faint surprise in her voice.

The girl's lips formed a fearless smile.

Unit Three, relying on its uninjured right arm, launched a counterattack. It swung five blades in rapid succession, carving through the air in an effort to cut the girl down. Yet no matter how fiercely it slashed, the girl evaded every strike by the width of a sheet of paper. With casual, almost playful flicks of her own weapon, she skimmed the horned machine's body, leaving behind a series of shallow cuts.

"Heh… more. Come now—try harder. Otherwise, this won't be any fun."

Her voice carried a note of delighted anticipation. The superficial wounds seemed to bore her.

Driven into a corner, Unit Three gathered all the strength in its armored frame and brought the blade of its right arm crashing down upon the girl's head.

But it was as if the girl had been waiting for precisely that moment. A crooked smile deepened at the corner of her mouth.

In the next instant, her blade flashed.

A single, fluid arc sliced through the air. The remaining sections of Unit Three's body were severed cleanly, and oil erupted from the upper portion of its right arm, spraying outward at the same time.

"Gyaaaaaah!"

"Ah… so that's your voice," the girl said coolly. "How grating."

Hearing the cyborg's scream, the girl calmly licked the blood from her blade.

Though more than half its faculties of reason had already been lost, Unit Number Three understood one thing with brutal clarity: it had been completely driven into a corner.

It had lost her greatest weapons, and its body was riddled with countless cuts.

Meanwhile, its opponent remained virtually unscathed—worse, she seemed to take pleasure in toying with it.

“So this is all you can do? Look—can’t you see? Not a single one of your strikes can defeat me. Even a puppy would understand that much. Come now, try harder. Amuse me.”

The girl gave a light, beckoning wave of her hand, as if inviting a game.

But having lost the means to fight with both blades destroyed, Unit Three made its decision at once. It spun on its heel and bolted toward the forest.

No matter how one judged it, the gap in their abilities was too great. To protect itself, it had no choice but to flee.

It was not calculation but instinct that guided it.

Unit Number Three slipped deftly between the trees and made for the deserted shoreline beyond the woods. Just as it was about to reach the sandy beach, blossoms of light began to burst into bloom along the far side of the coast—

Scarlet and emerald lights flared, washing the surroundings in lurid color, as thunderous explosions split the air.

“So this is the end? How dull.”

A woman’s voice spoke suddenly from behind.

Unit Three turned—and the last thing it saw was a purple-haired girl. A cruel smile curved her lips as she brought a blade whistling down toward its skull.

4.

When Yuri opened her eyes that morning, the first thing that leapt into view was the familiar white ceiling above her.

As she shifted her gaze, the rest of the small four-and-a-half tatami room came into focus—the white wallpaper, the dresser and desk she had known for years. The large window beside her bed stood open, letting in gentle morning sunlight and a soft, pleasant breeze that drifted lazily through the room.

She glanced at the clock. It was not yet eight.

Seated beside the bed, her childhood friend Tomoyuki was reading a magazine.

“Tomoyuki…? This is my room…?”

“Yuri—you’re awake. Thank goodness. Are you all right? Does anything hurt?”

Tomoyuki looked up at the sound of her voice, his expression tight with concern.

“Um… why are you here, Tomoyuki?”

Her head still felt faint and slightly hazy from the shock. She could not immediately grasp what had happened.

“Hey, you collapsed on the road in the forest last night. It really scared me. I was on my way home from the festival and went to look for you, and there you were, sprawled out in a place like that.”

At those words, the girl tried to recall what she had done the night before.

That’s right. I was going to see the Nirakinai Festival. I set off down the forest road and had some kind of attack there… and then, from the sea, something like a mirror—something strange—appeared… After that, I can’t remember anything.

“Honestly, why were you in the forest? It’s dangerous to spend the whole night fooling around out there.”

“That’s… well, I wanted to see the Nirakinai Festival just once with my own eyes… I’m sorry for making you worry.”

As she spoke, Tomoyuki showed a slightly exasperated expression. She had always been talking about the festival; perhaps, without thinking, she had forced him to come looking for her.

“I might have been partly to blame. I thought something had exploded near you. There were a lot of trees knocked down…”

“Huh? What do you mean? What happened?”

“What do you mean, what happened…?”

She closed her eyes and once more tried to retrace the events of the previous night.

Surely something like a mirror, shaped like the pupil of an eye, had come drifting toward her… and then—

Yuri looked down at her hands.

Around her wrist was a bracelet that reflected the morning light with a faint gleam, as though nothing at all had happened.

This had not been there before. She did not remember putting it on.

“A Witch Blade…? No—? Surely, that was—”

The pulse of the bracelet throbbed in time with her own heartbeat, as if they were linked.

“From what everyone’s saying, it sounds like something like a missile was launched from the American military facility and sealed off that road. And near the forest—by the shore—something exploded, so the area’s off-limits now.”

“Hey… are you even listening?”

At his irritated remark, she pressed her lips together.

“Yes… I am.”

A vision drifted up in Yuri’s mind: the form of that cyborg.

A face that could not be called intelligent, a body built of hardened flesh and muscle. And on its forearms, metal claws fixed like blades.

That’s right. I feel like I fought that creature. And then… drawing a sword from my right arm—”

“Anyway, Yuri came through it safely. There was an explosion powerful enough to fell trees, and yet she scarcely has a scratch. Even now her complexion is good. The doctor said so too — ‘It truly was a stroke of luck.’”

With the faint, guarded smile of a boy trying to reassure someone, Yuri replied, “Yes… I suppose so.”

(But that sensation in my right arm…)

The resistance in the flesh when I sliced through the cyborg. The memory of that resistance still lingers unmistakably in my right hand.

And then — the spurting blood and oil.

I can’t remember clearly, but in that instant, I felt an overwhelming sense of relief. After that, I fled the blast and somehow made it back to the woods, yet I was so exhausted I could hardly remain standing.

…No. That’s not right. The memory I’m trying to recall is already thinning, fading like a flame guttering out. As though everything was merely a bad dream.

While trying once more to recollect last night’s events, the middle-aged attending physician enters the room.

“Ah, Yuri. Good morning. How are you feeling?”

“Good morning, Doctor. I feel wonderful. It’s been such a long time since I’ve welcomed the morning in such good spirits.”

From the moment she awoke, the girl had felt none of the violent shock she had feared in her body.

“I see… So you don’t feel any dizziness?” the doctor asked during the morning examination. “When you were caught in the explosion, I was worried you might have struck your head.”

“No, I’m fine.”

“Your pulse is steady, and your temperature is normal… Yes, I’d say you’re in good condition today.”

After completing the examination, the attending physician began making notes in her chart.

“Well then, Doctor? May I go outside?”

The doctor hesitated briefly before answering.

“Hmm… With your condition, it should be all right. But don’t overdo it. Make sure you come back soon.”

“Thank you.”

Having received permission, the girl slipped on a light cardigan over her pajamas and put on a hat before stepping outside.

A wide expanse of blue sky stretched overhead, the greenery surrounding the sanatorium vivid in the summer light. Beyond it, the emerald sea glittered, reflecting the sun in countless dazzling shards.

(Such a familiar view… and yet, somehow, it feels clearer and more radiant than it did yesterday.)

Even though she had only stepped outside, she could not suppress the way her spirits naturally began to rise. It felt as though the world, which until now appeared monotone, had suddenly taken on vivid color.

“Yuri, are you really all right?”

“Yes. The morning sun feels so pleasant!”

When Shion spoke to her, Yuri answered brightly.

Of course, she was also concerned about the bracelet with the red jewel. And about the faint, living sensation that remained in her right arm.

But the reason her body felt this good was surely because of that mysterious object. Thinking so made her feel strangely lighthearted.

(Maybe Witchblade didn't want me to die.)

If so, then the mysterious object that had now become a bracelet might have been carried to this island by the ocean currents that circle it because she had wished to be well again… because she had always held that wish in her heart.

(On the night of the summer festival, when I met Witchblade…)

Feeling as though the island's gods had somehow guided her to this fate, the girl walked on, drawn beneath the clear blue sky toward the tip of the cape.

She dashed off.

"Yūri! Hey, is it really okay to run like that?"

At the sight of Yūri racing ahead, Tomoyuki could only stare in astonishment. The frail girl, who until recently had always seemed so delicate, was now running with genuine delight—something he had never imagined she could do. Of course, it wasn't just that she was running; she was flipping her long hair behind her as she sprinted.

"Hey, wait!"

Even as his teacher had warned him earlier, today his body felt light—almost buoyant—and in an unusually good mood. When he called out, slightly out of breath, she turned toward him with a bright, unguarded smile.

"Ah, the sea breeze feels wonderful!"

Trying to catch up, Tomoyuki hurried after her, and Yūri reached the tip of the cape first, gazing out over the morning ocean.

The figure of Yūri standing there with the emerald-green sea glittering behind her under the blue sky seemed, to him, indescribably radiant. It might have been the first time he had ever seen such an expression on her face.

At the same time, he couldn't shake the strange feeling that she seemed farther away than ever before.

What was this sensation?

It was as though Yūri were standing before the gates of some distant, unreachable realm.

Why did such a thought unsettle him so deeply, when he himself could not even understand the reason?

He did not want to spoil the image of the girl overflowing with vitality. Swallowing the faint sense of unease that had stirred within him, Tomoyuki merely stood at her side, slightly out of breath.

“Yūri… if you’re feeling this well, maybe we really can go together next month to the Niraikanai Festival.”

“Mm… yes. I’m sure we can go together.”

Yūri’s voice was bright, almost dazzling.

Just then, the roar of a helicopter shattered the stillness as it thundered toward them from the distance.

“That’s… a U.S. military helicopter…”

Watching the aircraft draw steadily closer, the girl bit her lip in anxiety. The harsh pounding of its rotors tore through the calm air, and to Tomoyuki it felt like an ominous sign—a premonition of turmoil about to unfold.

5.

“What on earth is this?”

Staring at the display of his laptop, Michael was speechless with astonishment. Soldiers were operating under a provisional tent, and the sight before him left him stunned.

Neural Network Number Three had exploded, blown apart into fragments.

Even now, soldiers were entering the restricted zone and working amid the debris to recover what they could. There were traces suggesting that something had ignited in midair; among the wreckage were bloodstains and signs that something had been severed by a sharp blade.

No usable footage remained. The recording equipment had been destroyed by the blast, and whatever image data might once have been captured lay outside the effective range of recovery. It was impossible to determine with certainty what had happened. Yet, judging from the scene—the way the forest had been slashed

throughout and something feeling before being destroyed along this very shoreline—it was not hard to imagine the course of events.

From the damaged chip, only a single image file had been salvaged.

What appeared on it was something he could scarcely believe.

The colors were partially corrupted by monochrome noise, but the figure was unmistakable: a girl, her body wrapped in something like an ominous, pitch-dark aura, raising her right hand. At that very moment—just as she seemed poised to tear her prey apart—her face bore an expression like that of a predator.

“Don’t tell me… that girl brought down Unit Three? Hey—there’s no other footage?”

Regretfully, this was all they had managed to restore.

As if on cue, a man in a white shirt came hurrying toward them, wiping his sweat with a handkerchief.

Beyond him, over the vast Pacific, something small drifted upon the water; the hue of skin and the facial bone structure suggested it had come from the West.

“They’ve even got Western blood in their veins.”

“Michael, No. 2 is asking to see you. Says something’s happened.”

“Oh? Joseph. Come in.”

Joseph Kitō is a third-generation Japanese-American and the president of Cyber Develop, a company headquartered on Okinawa’s main island. His firm manufactures and sells a range of products—nutritional supplements, myoelectric prosthetic hands and legs, artificial organs with extended lifespans. Though small in scale, it has earned remarkable attention within certain circles of the industry.

Neuro-Logger is the result of a secret collaboration between Michael and Joseph—an application of the company’s technology to years of research: the culmination of their work on cybernetic soldiers.

“Joseph, take a look at this.”

He pointed to the screen. On it played footage of a third-generation Japanese man, sweat streaming down his face as he brandished a device.

“Huh… Th-this is… could it be—Witchblade!?”

From Joseph’s hand, the handkerchief slipped and fell to the floor.

The word “Witchblade” flashed across the screen as if it had been spoken aloud.

“‘Witchblade’? What’s that?”

At the unfamiliar term, Michael tilted his head.

“The NSWF headquarters is looking for it. The ultimate weapon. If we get our hands on that, even Neuro-Logger won’t stand a chance…”

“‘NSWF,’” Joseph replied to the question.

“NSWF is the English abbreviation for the National Science Welfare Foundation. It’s an organization established to promote social welfare through the proactive application of science. Its influence has now spread across the globe, with branches in various countries.

“However, the truth is that NSWF harbors a hidden objective: ‘to create superior human beings through the power of science.’ To that end, it conducts a wide range of research and experiments in facilities around the world—projects carried out under the strictest secrecy.

“In fact, it was NSWF that founded Cyber Develop. Originally, it was an institution dedicated to research in physical enhancement, operating under orders from the organization.

“Through that process, Joseph began to nurture an ambition—to further modify humans enhanced by drugs and produce even more exceptional soldiers, thereby reaping enormous profits.

“Of course, even administering doping agents does not, by itself, enable limitless enhancement of the human body. There are drawbacks and boundaries. Moreover, the results of further experimentation were devastating: alongside intense physical augmentation, subjects would lose their rationality and descend into violent madness.

“So they introduced mechanical modification through pharmaceuticals and surgical procedures, implanting control chips directly into the brain—thus devising a method to regulate thought and behavior.

“And that… is what Witchblade truly is.”

“I don’t know the finer details myself. But it seems the weapon chooses its wielder of its own will—and that the woman who obtains it gains immense power.”

“That sounds like a fairy tale.”

“Perhaps. Yet the footage before our eyes—images that can hardly be dismissed as fabrication—show Neuro-Logger being destroyed. If that is the case, then we have no choice but to believe it.”

“In other words… this means she is the chosen woman?”

“If Witchblade is our opponent, then it is regrettable, but No. 3’s defeat would make sense.”

Michael listened to Joseph’s explanation, then turned back to the monitor.

Only the upper half of the woman’s body was visible on the screen, yet even so she appeared strikingly beautiful—far more glamorous than an ordinary woman. If she truly possessed the power to surpass Neuro-Logger, then who could say what immense potential lay hidden within her?

“Michael, this is our chance. If we can secure Witchblade before the military or NSWF headquarters does, Neuro-Logger will become the most powerful soldier in history.”

Michael gave a broad nod of agreement.

“Yes… I agree. Joseph was already thinking ahead to the next phase of our plan.”

If they could incorporate Witchblade’s abilities into Neuro-Logger, it would, without question, become a veritable demon with a golden cudgel—unstoppable.

Moreover, the project they had been pursuing in absolute secrecy now showed signs of entering an even more promising phase.

“If that happens, there’ll be no one left to interfere with us. Once we’ve cleared away the last of the obstacles, we’ll have the men sweep the island for any Witchblade wearers. It’s a small island, after all. They can’t be that hard to find.”

The two men were certain of it: before long, the greatest power imaginable would be in their hands.

***

On the day the regular ferry linking the island to the mainland pulled into the harbor near Watazajima’s lone settlement—

“So this is Watazajima…”

Mitsushima Haruo stepped down the gangway with a large suitcase in hand, narrowing his eyes behind a pair of sunglasses.

Dressed in jeans and a polo shirt, he cut the figure of a rugged sportsman at first glance. Slightly taller and more solidly built than the average Japanese man, he carried himself with an air of quiet physical strength. As though musing to himself—I wonder what appears on this island… demons, perhaps? Or maybe insects…—he set off toward the village.

Chapter 2: Mystery

1.

That afternoon, Yuri was in the school library.

"Hmm…"

With a small sigh, she closed the thick book she had been reading.

"As I thought, there's nothing anywhere about the Witchblade. And if there were anything to investigate further, it would have to be here…"

There were limits to what one could find in an environment like this—a setting no different from any ordinary elementary or junior high school. The library's collection was modest, and even the village's public library would likely offer little more. Still, although it might be a long shot, she had hoped to come across some material mentioning the Witchblade.

A few days had passed since that incident, and her condition had gradually stabilized. School had resumed, and without the bracelet she could not remove, everything might have seemed like nothing more than a dream.

But this was reality.

"The Witchblade… what in the world is it?"

That question surfaced again, quietly stirring the back of her mind.

Since that day, her physical condition had remained surprisingly stable—without even the slightest hint of another attack. If this was thanks to the Witchblade, then in just these past few days her certainty had quietly deepened.

Yet when she thought about it calmly, she could not believe that this object—now in the form of a bracelet—had come to her simply to save her life.

Why did you come to me? Tell me…

The moment she posed the question to the Witchblade in her heart, Yuri's vision suddenly went dark.

Flames roared up before her.

The clash of steel rang out sharply.

Cries of grief from people fleeing—and the coarse laughter of sinister men.

Without warning, a scene rose in her mind: a rural village somewhere in medieval Europe. Houses burned. A band of armored soldiers roamed at will through the settlement, cutting down any man they found while dragging off the women.

Yes… it had been during a long war.

Until then, her village had remained peaceful. But one day the soldiers had invaded, slaughtering her family.

And I…?

She had tried to run.

No—this isn't my memory!

In the forest she had been captured by a man, her clothes torn away, humiliation forced upon her. She struggled desperately against her fate, but with a woman's slender body she had no means of resisting a man so powerful.

Before long, **Joan of Arc** appeared. And with this in her hand, the girl overwhelmed the man. Believing that she had heard the voice of God and had been entrusted with the mission to save her country, the girl fought against the opposing army.

But the girl—Rei—remained silent.

Gradually the heat made it difficult to breathe, and even the sound of her prayers began to fade.

Ah… but somehow, it felt strangely pleasant.

Was this Yūri's own train of thought, or that of the girl being condemned to the stake? The two were mingled together so completely that she could no longer tell them apart. Yet, more powerful than the agony of her body being burned was the strange comfort—like being wrapped in the warmth of her mother.

She was bound to a wooden stake erected in the square. Around her, piles of firewood had been stacked high, and soon they were set alight. Blazing flames rose and enveloped her whole body, and the acrid smell of her own skin and hair scorching filled her nose.

The girl desperately offered prayers to God. But perhaps because she had already abandoned the will to fight…

In the next moment, time seemed to leap forward several years. The girl, now slightly older, was being sentenced to execution by burning at the stake. The Church had denounced her as a bearer of a “heretical hand.” Though in truth it was the scheme of a bishop who had long hidden behind the mask of piety, the girl—already weary of nothing but fighting—chose the path of accepting everything that had come to pass.

At that very moment—just as the sensation was about to completely fade away—

“Hey, Yūri, what’s wrong?”

Someone called out to her carelessly, and the girl was pulled back to reality.

For a moment she could not understand what she had been doing, and she looked around in confusion. Then she saw the worried face of her childhood friend, the boy Tomoyuki, peering at her.

“...Hey, you hear me? What happened?”

“Oh—yeah. That was my line, you know. I think I just dozed off with my eyes open.”

“Huh…? Why would you even be thinking about something like that…?”

Tomoyuki spoke with a slightly frightened tone. But he did not seem particularly concerned, and after a moment he said casually,

“Anyway, let’s head back soon.”

He pointed out the window.

“Ah… yeah. It’s already that time, huh?”

Yūri nodded.

Because of her frail health, Yūri had come to this island for treatment. Unless she was studying or reading in the library, she usually spent most of her days quietly inside the sanatorium.

The midsummer sun in the south was fierce enough to give even a healthy person heatstroke. The island’s residents also structured their daily activities around the cooler hours of the morning and evening, avoiding going outside when the sun was high overhead. For a girl with a weak body like hers, going out during that time was practically unthinkable.

There was one other thing that weighed on Yūri’s mind.

Perhaps it was the memory of Jeanne d'Arc.

But even so, how had she known to give such a precise answer to Tomoyuki's question?

When she thought about it, the fear that girl had felt when she was captured by enemy soldiers—and the desperate wish not to die—had been conveyed to her with remarkable clarity. It had felt uncannily similar to the time when she herself had suffered one of her attacks.

Perhaps the terror of death, and the instinctive clinging to life, were what had summoned the spirit known as "Witch Blade."

Yet the most mysterious part was that when the girl had prayed, *"I don't want to die,"* she had somehow known in advance that Witch Blade existed there.

Perhaps it had happened to Yūri once before as well.

The mysterious gauntlet called Witch Blade had been lying beneath the sea surrounding this southern island.

Even so, it felt somehow too strange to dismiss as mere coincidence.

Of course, it might simply have drifted here on an ocean current. On this island, ever since ancient times, there have been stories passed down about various strange objects washing ashore.

And yet, to Yūri, it felt as though Witch Blade possessed something almost like a will of its own.

"Or perhaps… had he started reading fantasy novels again?"

It was half in jest, yet the remark carried a knowing edge, pulling him back to himself. Just as she said, Yūri had always loved spirited protagonists—especially those in adventure fantasies who journey through other worlds. He would project himself onto the hero, lose himself in imagined realms, and embark on grand adventures. It had been one of the few pleasures available to a frail, mostly bedridden girl.

Thanks to that, she had devoured every novel illustrated in this book. Since about last year, she had even begun ordering new books one after another. Simply because she understood and appreciated that kind of world, the boy, too, now found himself drawn into Yūri's dreamlike realm—perhaps that was the lingering aftereffect.

"Uh, well… I was just looking something up today," he said, showing her the cover of the book in his hands.

“‘Myths of the World: Encyclopedic Compendium.’”

“Oh? So that’s what it is… Wait, you actually laughed a little just now, didn’t you?”

Yūri teased him with a knowing smile.

“I guess I did,” she said. “You looked so serious about it, after all.”

“Still, it’s nice to know you can study even without coming to school, right?”

“…No—that wasn’t it.”

The girl, who had seemed on the verge of saying something important, quietly swallowed her words and let them fade away.

After that, things proceeded much as they always did. The boy advanced another step or two, and the girl followed half a pace behind. As for Yūri—though she had been lively enough before—she still hadn’t fully regained her strength, and she had already missed about half a year of school.

Strictly speaking, she hadn’t returned to school at all. Rather, it was Yūri who would come to the sanatorium to see Tomoyuki. She often listened to what he had learned there, and at times would even explain things back to him in her own way.

When they left the school grounds like this, Yūri would sometimes walk with the boy as far as the sanatorium. On days when there was no car to take him, she would accompany him all the way there.

Lately, whenever they walked side by side, their shoulders nearly touching, his heart would begin to pound, leaving him slightly short of breath. Yet he knew this feeling was different from the bitterness of her illness.

He hadn’t understood it before, but only recently had Yūri begun to realize what was quietly taking root within her.

“I like Tomoyuki… but still, I can’t quite say it like that.”

Even so, knowing that her remaining time might be limited, she also knew she had to find the courage to tell him how she felt.

If she were to say such a thing, she felt it might only trouble him.

For now, it was enough simply to walk beside Tomoyuki like this. She wanted these days to go on just a little longer.

And yet, that small wish, that fragile happiness, was abruptly shattered.

Just as they reached the edge of the forest, Yūri suddenly felt a sharp pain in her wrist and stopped in her tracks.

“What… is this feeling…? This—could it be the Witchblade…?”

When she focused, she realized the red core at the center of the bracelet was pulsing faintly, as though in response to the pain.

“…What is it? I feel something… an enemy, nearby…!”

At the edge of the words that rose unbidden to her lips, a surge welled up from deep within her body.

“Ah… what is this… my heart is pounding… I want to fight…! I—I want to fight so badly—!”

It was like being pulled forward by a mad hound, unable to calm herself.

“That’s what the Witchblade is telling me… to fight… But not now. Not now. Because Tomoyuki is here—”

Just as she tried to steady her breathing and calm herself, another memory flickered through Yūri’s mind.

Could it be that this, too, was something that had once happened somewhere in this world?

The beautiful black-haired girl in her sailor uniform donned the Witchblade—known in the secluded mountain temple as the “Devil’s Hand.”

It was a weapon meant to slay demons.

Long ago, she had made a childish promise with a boy burdened by a cruel fate:

“If I ever become a demon… then you must kill me.”

“I want you to cut me down… Please. If that happens—become a demon and face me.”

And the boy had sworn he would never refuse her.

For Yuri, the bond between them was something too radiant ever to be broken.

And so, she fought.

She cut down grotesque enemies, one after another.

The sensation of slicing through them—it matched her memories perfectly. Even the faint resistance of flesh and bone… she knew it well. And yet the blade passed cleanly, beautifully through them—

—and with that, a feeling began to rise.

(This feeling… I know it. But—)

It was vivid, almost sickeningly sweet, and at the same time unbearably raw and alive.

Just recalling it made the core of her body tremble and burn.

An emotion swelled up within her—something she could no longer hold back.

"Hey… Yuri? Yuri!?"

Her shoulders were shaken, and she gave a small gasp.

"Huh…?"

"I've been calling you. What's wrong? What happened?"

"…Wait—was that… you just now?"

She stopped in her tracks, murmuring in confusion.

"Hey—you're a little flushed. Are you feeling okay?"

"Ah… no, it's not that… it's just…"

Unable to explain what was happening inside her own body, Yuri fidgeted and absently touched the Witchblade at her wrist.

Even so, the desire to fight burned within her—like a volcano on the verge of eruption, its magma ready to burst forth at any moment.

(No… I can't… I can't take any more—!)

But there was one thing she absolutely did not want Tomoyuki to see.

Sensing the Witchblade was about to activate again, Yuri grabbed her wrist in desperation, trying to suppress it.

"Sorry, Tomoyuki… but this is as far as you go today. I'm going on ahead for a bit."

With that, she broke into a run, pulling away from him.

"H-Hey! Yuri? What's wrong all of a sudden?! Yuri!"

He chased after her, while simultaneously calling out to her.

“My body’s burning…! Faster… I have to lose him…!”

She shook off his pursuit and plunged deeper into the forest.

I have to do something about this urge… before it takes over—!

But just as her movements began to falter, her body starting to give way from within—

power surged up again, swelling inside her as though it might burst.

When she finally turned back, Tomoyuki was nowhere to be seen.

“Ah… I can fight now. I can finally fight without holding back.”

In that instant, scales like a dragon’s hide spread out from the bracelet, enveloping the girl’s body.

It wasn’t merely a change on the surface—the transformation surged from deep within her, reshaping her from the inside out. Even her hair shifted color before her eyes.

The first time, perhaps because she had been half-conscious, she had been unable to control the power flooding out during the transformation, unleashing a shockwave strong enough to fell the surrounding trees.

But this time was different.

She contained it all—every bit of that force—firmly within her body.

As she became a fully synchronized Witchblade host, strength coursed through her, and the presence of her enemies grew sharper, clearer in her awareness.

“Two… two of them? Hm. I suppose that’s a little better than last time.”

She licked her lips.

Then Yuri ran straight toward the approaching presences.

Moments later, a rustling sound echoed ahead.

Two cyborg soldiers burst from the undergrowth.

One had an assault rifle built into its right arm.

The other, with mechanical legs, wielded a double-bladed battle axe.

It was the ranged attacker—the one with the rifle—that made the first move against Yuri.

He spotted the girl and, without hesitation, raised his weapon, unleashing a burst of fire.

But the current Yūri was no longer someone who would simply stand and take a rain of bullets. She was in a forest thick with trees—there were countless places to hide. She deflected the incoming rounds with her blade, then slipped behind a tree to avoid the rest.

—or perhaps she had already moved.

From above, another figure descended, battle-axe in hand, striking as though to cleave her apart. The cyber-soldier, its legs modified, seemed to move faster than before, its speed amplified by its ability to leap and maneuver through the forest.

The axe swung down, and for an instant it looked as though it would split the girl's skull.

"…!"

In that fleeting moment, Yūri caught the blade with her left arm, stopping the axe dead.

"Tch… At this rate, I'm still too soft. If I don't stay sharp, I'll be cut down in an instant."

Even as she muttered, she extended the blade from her right arm and slashed at her opponent.

But the cyber-soldier kicked off the ground with its enhanced legs, springing backward in a single motion and vanishing into the dense undergrowth.

"Damn it… it's fast. If I lose sight of it, I'm done for."

Just as she turned to pursue—

From behind her, another muzzle flashed, spitting fire.

Caught off guard, a bullet struck her cleanly in the left shoulder.

Even so, though the Witchblade dulled the impact, it could not completely block the force of a 7.62 mm round. Yūri clicked her tongue and grimaced faintly as she hurried into the shadow of a nearby tree.

As though anticipating that movement, another of the axe-wielders slipped swiftly between the trees, closing in on her.

A powerful horizontal strike came tearing toward her, strong enough to fell even a large tree in a single blow.

Yūri leapt at the last possible instant, narrowly evading it.

It seemed these two had already learned how to fight—how to use their respective strengths in tandem, like pack animals moving by instinct, each understanding how they ought to engage.

“So, they’re not just mindless brutes… heh…”

The thought drew a small grin from her lips.

From the cyborg’s gun, bullets roared forth once more, while the ferocious axe-wielder pressed the attack without pause.

Under normal circumstances, anyone would have cried out in despair and tried to flee.

However, she felt neither dread nor fear.

On the contrary—the more she fought, the more a strange, yet comforting sensation surged through her.

“My body feels so light… And even thinking like this doesn’t bother me at all.”

Normally, her illness rendered her bedridden: incapable of strenuous physical activity.

That alone made it feel as if she were dreaming.

And yet, despite it all, her body still moved—driven onward by something that could only be called a quiet, stubborn resolve. Despite living a life of endless convalescence, there were times when that same impulse seemed to take hold of her as well. It was a feeling so exhilarating that it was borderline orgasmic: something best left to the imagination.

(How wonderful… to feel like this… ah, more… more…)

Before she could even hear Witchblade’s voice, Yuri had already taken a step forward toward the enemy.

From deep within her heart, even the last trace of rational restraint had vanished. Now there remained only a single desire: to carve into the enemy before her eyes. Driven by that impulse alone, she lunged forward.

2.

Having lost sight of that sickly girl, Tomoyuki wandered in confusion.

From deep within the forest came a broken, intermittent cry.

“Yuri… I want to go… Where did you go? Hey… this is getting bad…”

How had she ended up entering such a strange forest? It made no sense at all. And yet, from somewhere close by came sounds that clearly did not belong to any ordinary place—heavy clashes, like metal striking against metal.

“What are you doing?”

“Don’t come any closer. This is a dangerous place.”

Even if it was only his imagination, he could not ignore it. Drawn by something he could not name, he found himself moving toward the source. Perhaps it was that same reckless courage that had carried him this far.

But now, the boy was uneasy—uneasy above all for the frail girl he had known since childhood.

(If only I had gone with her…)

The thought took hold, and he could no longer remain where he stood. Between the fear of the unknown and his concern for her, something fierce clashed within him.

“…All right. I’ll go.”

In the end, what drove him forward was not reason, but the simple desire to protect her. He could not abandon a weak childhood friend to her fate.

Suppressing his fear, he moved cautiously toward the sound.

He could not yet tell who—or what—was making it. But the noise continued without pause, like something surging endlessly.

He might already be nearby. Keeping his wits about him, he knew he could not afford carelessness. Judging from the sound, whoever it was seemed to be moving while continuing the fight within a relatively confined area.

After advancing a short distance, a face suddenly emerged from the shadow of a tree, peering out warily toward the source of the noise.

“What… what is that…?”

The unbelievable sight before him brought his thoughts to a halt.

What stood there were cyborg soldiers—one with its right arm transformed into an assault rifle, others similarly mechanized, their bodies altered from the legs up, each gripping a massive battle-axe. And the one fighting them—

The cyborgs emitted cries that could hardly be called human. Mixed among their beast-like roars were fragments of words: “Kill!” “Do it!” Though they spoke, no trace

of reason remained in their faces. Their movements far exceeded the limits of ordinary human ability, even though they must once have been human.

Yet even more astonishing was their opponent: a purple-haired girl.

Her body was clad in armor resembling the hide of a reptile. From her slender frame and the delicate appearance of her hands and feet, it was hard to believe she was engaged in such a brutal fight at all.

At that moment, the girl extended what looked like a long sword from her right arm and met one of the cyborg soldiers head-on.

(So, she can fight them on equal terms…?)

Though he had only just begun observing, the boy quickly grasped the flow of battle from her movements and expression.

She faced them almost as if she were enjoying herself, a faint smile playing on her lips as she repelled their attacks. Gunfire rang out in rapid succession from the cyborgs' assault rifles—but soon, the sound abruptly ceased. It seemed they had run out of ammunition.

Meanwhile, she deflected another unit's attack with her battle-axe. The cyborg soldier reached for a fresh cartridge at its waist—but its hand gripped empty air.

It seemed to have lost its rhythm.

Had she been waiting for that moment?

The purple-haired girl swung her axe and drove it deep into the cyborg soldier.

"Out of bullets already? That was quick."

She spoke lightly, a cold smile flickering across her lips as she buried the blade without hesitation.

From somewhere in the darkness, a blade flew out and pierced her in the abdomen.

"Gaah… aaah…!"

As the cyborg soldier wailed its death throes, she tore the blade free, blood dripping from her stomach. Facing the enemy directly before her, she gave a light leap and landed atop his head. Blades sprang from her boots and skewered the cyborg soldier through the crown of the skull.

That strike alone made it obvious the cyborg soldier was finished. Yet she did not stop. She crushed the enemy's head beneath her feet then she drew another blade and, this

time, used the weapon mounted along her right arm to carve through his torso. Sparks scattered from the severed machinery, and the cyborg soldier equipped with an assault rifle exploded almost at once, bursting into fragments.

The woman stepped briskly away to avoid the blast. Then another body, trembling with feverish vigor, lunged toward her. She caught the battle axe's blade with the short sword in her left hand.

"Are you trying to butcher your own comrades? Or maybe you don't even possess the brains to think that far?"

The cyborg soldier swung the battle axe repeatedly, trying to cleave her into meat for its blade. Each blow carried enough force to split an ordinary human cleanly in two. However, the creature swung at her carelessly often losing its balance with each swing. Perhaps because it recognized the woman before it wielded destructive power equal to or greater than its own, it lashed out with desperately powerful attacks, hoping to land one.

She retorted with a snarled smile akin a beast bearing its fangs.

"Oh dear, is this already your limit? At this level, you're not even enough to make me feel good."

Mocking him, the woman swung her longsword.

Meeting the battle axe head-on, the metallic blade on her arm cut through it in a clean, beautiful arc. The severed axe-head spun away toward the young man hiding nearby, embedding itself in the trunk of a tree right behind him. The cyborg soldier let out a small cry of alarm.

Perhaps wondering how to fight now that it had lost its weapon, the cyborg soldier spread both arms wide and lunged to seize her.

Compared to the woman—a slender figure barely taller than one hundred sixty centimeters—the hulking man of nearly two meters should have held an overwhelming advantage once he caught her. Ordinarily, that would have been true.

Yet she showed not the slightest bit of panic even as the cyborg soldier grabbed hold of her.

"This is getting boring already."

At those muttered words, her purple hair stretched outward like living tendrils and pierced into the cyborg soldier's mechanized thighs.

“Gah… aaah…!”

The cyborg soldier screamed in agony and released her. It staggered backward as though trying to flee, but its mechanical legs had already ceased functioning, and it collapsed face-first onto the ground.

She coldly observed the pitiful sight.

“What a pathetic mess. You alone still can’t satisfy me… though perhaps you can amuse me a little longer.”

Murmuring those words, she thrust her sword into the left shoulder of the cyborg soldier, whose legs no longer moved.

“Gyaaaah!”

With the blade driven through its body, the monster let out an inhuman shriek of agony

“Don’t cry out like that. Come now—scream louder.”

The woman twisted the sword gleefully inside the wound, gouging through the shoulder. Then, when she tore the blade free, a spray of blood burst upward and splashed across her face.

She licked her lips, slowly and almost seductively, and drew her tongue across the blood staining the corners of her mouth.

“Can’t you even scream properly anymore?”

The cyborg soldier’s eyes and mouth gaped wide as its body convulsed violently. Yet all it could manage were broken, voiceless gasps.

“Hehe… what, no voice left? If that’s all, then you can’t satisfy me.”

A delighted smile floated across her face as she raised her sword once more, and fresh torrents of blood spilled out across the ground.

Around the cyborg soldier, so much blood had been spilled that the earth could no longer absorb it. It spread into a sea of dark, blackened liquid.

“Ah… yes. This scent, this feeling… it’s wonderfully disgusting.”

A look of ecstasy crossed the girl’s face as she licked the blood from the edge of her blade.

Majimun… so that’s a Majimun…

Only now did Tomoyuki realize the true horror before him.

In Ryukyuan folklore, a Majimun is a monster—a word used for all manner of yokai and supernatural beings.

A body wrapped in grotesque scales. Blades protruding not only from its arms, but from its knees and even its shins. A creature that no longer resembled anything human.

Yet its most horrifying trait was not its appearance. It was the obvious delight it took in battle, in wounding its enemies.

If one saw such a thing, one could only conclude that it was neither demon nor monster, but something even worse.

Overcome by terror, Tomoyuki began to turn and flee.

But she had already noticed him.

The girl, whose enhanced senses had been sharpened further by her Witchblade armor, had clearly heard his footsteps and identified the figure of the boy standing behind her.

“Is that… Tomoyuki-kun?”

At the sound of her voice, Yuri finally came back to herself.

Then she noticed the cyborg soldier’s corpse at her feet, the blood-soaked blade in her right hand, and the trail of blood splashed across her entire body.

“N-no… no!”

With a cry of horror, she stumbled backward, retreating from the sea of blood.

Her back struck a tree a short distance away, and as though that impact had triggered it, the armor dissolved. At the same time, every trace of blood covering her body vanished.

Returned to her ordinary form, Yuri collapsed heavily onto the ground.

“Ah… what have I done…? This isn’t me. This is the Witchblade—”

Her thoughts dissolved into confusion.

Maybe it really was the Witchblade’s influence.

But she herself had enjoyed it as well.

And that made it even worse.

During the last battle, I was unconscious more than half the time. It felt almost like a dream.

But this time she remembered clearly everything she had done and everything she had thought.

And because of that, she could not believe that it had all been beyond her control.

“No… I believed it. I wanted it. And Tomoyuki-kun saw me like that…”

“What am I supposed to do?”

Tears welled up naturally and would not stop.

Yuri sank down where she was and continued to sob.

She was so consumed by her own despair was she that she never noticed the man watching her from the shadows beneath the trees.

3.

Meanwhile, Tomoyuki burst out of the forest and ran back toward the settlement as fast as he could.

Initially, he had been frantic to find Yuri, the sickly girl who had wandered into the woods. But amid the battle raging between the monsters, Yuri had emerged unharmed.

“Oh… right! Yuri!”

Relief flooded through him.

But only for a moment.

Dark clouds of anxiety began to spread through the boy’s heart.

What should I do?

Should I go find someone? Or should I go back and see how she’s doing myself?

As he wrestled with the dilemma, Tomoyuki finally turned around and headed back the way he had come.

If something happened to Yuri while I was away getting help, I'd never forgive myself.

Of course, he had no illusion that he could defeat that purple-haired girl himself.

But I swore I'd protect Yuri, no matter what! Even if she only has a little time left to live, I'll stay by her side until the very end!

Tomoyuki knew the truth of Yuri's illness: there was no hope of recovery, and she had only a short time remaining.

Because of that, he had always tried to treat her normally, never burdening her with unnecessary sympathy.

Still, lately he had become more attached of her than ever before.

It was impossible to deny it.

The feeling growing inside him was love.

He had not told his friends, nor Yuri herself.

But if he ever confessed these feelings, how would the childhood friend who always greeted him with tears and a bright smile react?

The thought frightened him.

That fear was one reason he had never found the courage to confess.

Yet more than anything, he could not bear the possibility of leaving Yuri alone in a dangerous place where monsters lurked.

As he turned to run back—

A horrific sight flashed through his mind.

No. I'm going to find Yuri. I'll make sure she's safe.

Tomoyuki gritted his teeth and forced his trembling legs onward.

I want her to live. I want her to keep smiling until the very end.

Driven by that wish, he hurried back into the forest.

Then, through the thick undergrowth ahead, he heard a rustling sound.

Tomoyuki froze.

A purple-haired girl emerged from the brush.

It was Yuri.

The moment he saw her, relief washed over him.

Thank goodness... she's okay.

His knees nearly gave way.

“Yuri...!”

As he started toward her, feeling both anxious and relieved, he opened his mouth.

“I told you to head back first! Do you have any idea how worried I was? Hurry up and get away from here. I saw a Majimun in the forest!”

“Really? Is that so? I didn't see anything.”

The girl answered calmly, averting her gaze.

“Seriously? I heard a scream and everything. Didn't you notice?”

“I heard something, but... I was scared, so I came this way instead.”

That's strange. Yuri, are you hiding something from me?

The excuse felt awkward enough that Tomoyuki could not help suspecting her.

Why did she suddenly run into the forest?

“I... um... I really had to use the bathroom...”

Yuri muttered, her voice fading almost to nothing by the end.

“Oh. I see... Sorry.”

The instant a normal adolescent boy was reminded of such bodily matters, any further pursuit of the subject became impossible.

“Well then, let's get back to the sanatorium. Tomoyuki-kun, we should come back this way, along the coastal road.”

“A-ah... yeah...”

Yuri gave him an awkward smile.

Tomoyuki still wasn't entirely convinced, but there was no way he could continue the conversation now.

For the moment, he decided to drop the matter.

Even so, his suspicions had not completely vanished.

The Witchblade armor was so inhuman that it was hard to imagine it being Yuri herself. When transformed, her body became covered in scales, and even her hair turned a vivid purple.

Yet... there was something about her just now. A faint feeling of unease lingered in the back of his mind.

Perhaps it was because her appearance changed so drastically during transformation that he had failed to recognize her.

Or perhaps not.

Still, Yuri felt she could not allow Tomoyuki to pursue the matter any further.

If he continued digging, she feared the lies would eventually unravel.

I must never transform again anywhere near Tomoyuki-kun.

With that resolve firmly in her heart—

4.

Sometime after Yuri and Tomoyuki had left the area, a vehicle carrying Major Michael Fines arrived at the forest under cover of night.

The woods were already surrounded by yellow tape and warning signs marked KEEP OUT, while armed soldiers maintained vigilant watch.

One of the soldiers stationed nearby stepped forward and saluted as Michael exited the vehicle.

“What is the situation?”

“It appears there was quite a fierce battle. Erasing all traces will be difficult. Fortunately, it seems the residents never entered the forest.”

“Yet another incident, then? At this rate, the New Soldier experiment is beginning to look highly questionable.”

“Yes, Major.

“During the latest performance test, Subject Five—equipped with an assault rifle in its right arm and modified legs—suddenly went berserk and escaped. We traced the data chip's signal and followed it here, where it appears to have been attacked by the Witchblade once again.”

“And the Witchblade?”

At Michael's question, the soldier shook his head and offered him a protective mask.

“What we found were only the scattered remains of Subject Five and the body of Subject Seven, which appear to have died from blood loss. In short... the scene looks like a slaughterhouse. Please examine it yourself.”

“...I see. This is going to be unpleasant.”

Michael donned the mask and proceeded deeper into the forest.

Even before the recovery team had finished collecting the remains, the sight before him made him grimace.

The shattered commander unit of Subject Five lay scattered across the area.

Nearby was Subject Seven, dead from blood loss after both shoulders had been pierced through. Its mouth hung open as if frozen in a final scream, its eyes staring blankly into nothingness.

Nor was it only the bodies.

The grass, the trees, even the surrounding soil had been stained dark with blood.

There was enough blood here to suggest that Subject Seven's body had been utterly drenched in it.

Further ahead, fragments of Subject Five and scraps of flesh were strewn everywhere.

Despite the protective mask, the putrid stench of rotting corpses still reached his nose.

Whether from the oppressive heat, the horrific scene, or both, several young soldiers could be seen vomiting or leaning on one another for support.

The sight was gruesome enough to even startle battle-inured Michael.

“I'd like to say this is nothing compared to what a battle-hardened Marine has seen,” Michael muttered, “I've witnessed actual terrorist bombings, but even this is enough to make me look away.”

It was a scene he never wanted to see again.

“How much training would someone have to endure before becoming accustomed to this?” he asked.

The soldier beside him slowly shook his head.

“We cannot say for certain. However, when Subject Five went berserk this time, its brainwave activity indicated an extremely heightened state of excitement. Perhaps the New Soldier was reacting to the Witchblade in some way.”

“A detailed analysis will have to be left to Joseph's company. Frankly, New Soldier technology is becoming more trouble than it's worth.

“At least this time Subject Seven managed to stay composed long enough for the data chip to remain intact.”

“If we analyze it, we should learn quite a bit.”

“Indeed. Still, even with Subjects Five and Seven working together, they couldn't defeat the Witchblade...”

The New Soldier project boasted extraordinary combat power. A single unit was supposedly capable of overwhelming an entire Marine squad.

Yet despite facing the Witchblade two against one, those elite experimental soldiers had lost.

Just how powerful is the Witchblade, really?

The question resurfaced in Michael's mind.

Concurrently, another of Joseph's remarks echoed:

If we can analyze the Witchblade, we can create the ultimate New Soldier.

If they truly obtained that power, perhaps they could forge a weapon that would surpass every existing New Soldier.

But if enough time passed, the United States government or the NSWF might eventually discover that a Witchblade bearer existed on this island.

If that happened, both Michael and Joseph's plans would be thrown into chaos.

“We need the analysis of Subject Seven's data chip immediately. And issue orders to locate and secure the Witchblade bearer.”

Having given the command, Michael turned on his heel and left.

Chapter 3: Anomaly

1.

“Yuri, are you feeling all right?”

Tomoyuki called out to the girl seated sideways on the rear carrier of his bicycle.

“Yeah, I'm fine.”

Several days had passed since summer vacation began.

That evening, Tomoyuki had lent Yuri his bicycle so they could ride to the settlement to do some shopping.

Yuri had always been frail. Normally she could not even ride a bicycle by herself. If she needed to go somewhere after school, she usually had a doctor drive her.

But today she was riding behind Tomoyuki like this.

On the surface she laughed and chatted cheerfully so that he would not notice anything unusual.

Inside, however, she was still shaken by the fact that he had seen her transformed form.

Even now, when she thought back on the incident, she could hardly believe it had really happened.

Yet another feeling was beginning to crowd out her anxiety.

Back then... that wasn't really me. But... what if I transform again?

And what if, after transforming over and over, I become so absorbed in fighting that I lose myself?

The thought sent a fresh chill of fear through her.

“What is it, Yuri? Are you cold?”

Tomoyuki's voice pulled her from her thoughts.

“Oh, no. It's nothing. The sea breeze just feels really nice. Hey, can you go a little faster?”

“Of course! Hold on tight!”

The boy pushed harder on the pedals.

As the bicycle accelerated, the scent of the tide mingled with the evening wind and felt wonderfully refreshing against her skin.

The sun had already begun its descent toward the horizon.

The brilliant emerald-green sea and the blue coral reefs of daytime were now tinged with the orange hues of sunset, while gentle waves spread softly toward the shore.

The coastline, where white sand beaches and rocky outcroppings alternated, possessed an almost dreamlike beauty.

And as Yuri rode alongside Tomoyuki, gazing out at the scenery of Watariza Island, the knot that had been tightening inside her heart slowly began to loosen.

The urge to forget everything unpleasant welled up inside her.

It really is frightening...

But... I suppose I should be grateful to the Witchblade, too.

If it hadn't been for this, I never could have spent time with Tomoyuki-kun like this.

Her condition had remained remarkably stable, and she had suffered no attacks whatsoever. At first glance, it almost seemed as though her illness had been cured.

Even her attending physician had commented on how healthy she looked, and Yuri herself could feel the strength returning to her body.

Until the year before the festival, no matter how well she happened to feel, she had been forbidden from riding on the back of a bicycle because it would put too much strain on her body.

But now she could enjoy moments like this.

The thought that she might be able to spend ordinary days with the boy she loved—just like any other girl—brought happiness she had never imagined she could experience.

If this happiness had been granted to her...

...then she never wanted to lose it.

Of course, she still worried that Tomoyuki might remember what had happened in the forest.

Yet even if he never forgot, she hoped he would choose not to bring it up.

In that respect, she truly was grateful to him.

As long as those New Soldier troops never appear again... perhaps I'll never have to become that thing ever again.

Nor did she want to believe that monsters like that even existed.

If only I could stop transforming forever...

Then maybe I'd finally be able to live as the cheerful, healthy girl I've always wanted to be...

Thinking that, Yuri quietly rested her cheek against Tomoyuki's back.

“So, Yuri,” he said as he pedaled, “did you get a chance to look around all the preparations for the Niraikanai Festival while we were shopping today?”

“Oh, yeah. They're getting close now. Only about a week left until the festival.”

“That's right. It's the biggest festival on the island. It feels completely different from the other ones—everyone gets involved.”

The boy spoke proudly, as though the festival belonged to him.

Only one concern remained in the back of his mind.

The American soldiers had been visiting the settlement more and more frequently lately, sometimes even searching passing cars.

Maybe they're looking for the Witchblade...

Please... let nothing happen before the day of the Niraikanai Festival.

Before long, they reached the stretch of coast that also served as the island's public beach.

Without thinking, Yuri spoke up.

“Hey... could you stop for a minute? I'd like to go down to the beach for a little while.”

“Is something wrong?” Tomoyuki asked with concern.

“Nothing serious. I'll be fine after a short rest.”

He stopped his bicycle by the roadside.

Yuri climbed down from the rear carrier and walked barefoot across the sand toward the water.

She slipped off her sandals and stepped into the gently lapping surf.

“Wow... I haven't felt sand beneath my feet in ages. The water's a little cold... but it feels wonderful!”

“Yuri... are you really all right?”

“Of course. If I had a swimsuit with me, I'd almost want to go swimming.”

Seeing the worried expression on Tomoyuki's face, the girl smiled.

“Oh? Tomoyuki-kun... were you imagining me in a swimsuit?”

“W-what? N-no! It's not like that!”

Tomoyuki spluttered, his face instantly turning bright red.

Yuri couldn't help laughing.

Seeing him blush so honestly only deepened the rosy color already spreading across her own cheeks.

"...Come on, Yūri! If you keep saying things like that, I’m really going to get mad!"

"Hahaha... Tomoyuki, you're blushing."

Embarrassed, Tomoyuki clutched at his stomach as she laughed.

He watched in amazement.

(*I've never seen her laugh like this before...*)

Of course, he’d seen Yūri smile countless times before. But those had always been the faint, restrained smiles she'd worn to avoid worrying those around her. She had never laughed so openly, throwing caution aside.

Perhaps it was because illness had stolen from her the strength to laugh like an ordinary girl.

Yet here she was, laughing at the boy's teasing with a bright, carefree voice.

"...Yūri... are you really Yūri?"

The thought escaped Tomoyuki’s lips before he realized it.

"What do you mean, Tomoyuki?"

"No... it's just... you're different somehow..."

When he took the girl's shoulders gently in his hands, a voice called out behind them.

"Hey, you two."

Turning around, they saw a tall man wearing wraparound sunglasses walking down toward the beach where the two of them stood.

On an island with fewer than two thousand residents, almost everyone knew everyone else's face. But neither of them recognized him.

"Are you two local kids? Sorry to bother you."

Hearing that, Tomoyuki suddenly remembered he was still holding Yūri by the shoulders. From the stranger's perspective, it probably looked as though he had been about to kiss the girl.

"N-no! That's not what this is!"

He hurriedly released Yūri and fumbled for an explanation.

He seemed to understand what the stranger had assumed and lowered his head in embarrassment.

"Oh... I get it."

The stranger smiled awkwardly as Tomoyuki’s face flushed crimson.

"My name's Mishima Haruo. I'm from Tokyo."

"So... is there something you needed from us?"

The man seemed relieved by the boy's cautious tone.

"Actually, I wanted to ask you something."

"Go ahead."

"I heard there are Ryūkyū Kingdom ruins somewhere around here. Is that true?"

"There are, but..."

"But they're not open to visitors," he answered. "The area around them belongs to the U.S. military. It's dangerous—there are even live-fire exercises."

"I figured as much. Still, I wanted to see them."

"There's no point. Even if you went all the way around the island, you couldn't get close."

"I see..."

Realizing the conversation had become serious, Yūri quietly stepped behind Tomoyuki.

Mishima relaxed slightly.

"Sorry if I sounded suspicious."

"No... we've just learned not to trust strangers."

Mishima laughed.

"You're right."

Tomoyuki found herself thinking how strange that man was.

He'd never met him before, yet talking to him somehow felt oddly natural.

Maybe it was simply because he had an honest face.

The conversation shifted.

Recently, American soldiers had begun visiting the village more often.

Camp Hansen apparently no longer offered enough entertainment, and soldiers now came looking for the island's beaches and villages instead.

Compared to before, the village had become lively enough that people could actually call it "bustling."

Still, Tomoyuki noticed something.

Lately, soldiers didn't just come to eat or drink.

Sometimes it looked as though they were searching for something.

Could they be looking for that Majimun...?

He dismissed the thought.

"I've seen them around a lot lately," he said. "But nobody here knows what they're really doing."

Mishima nodded.

"So, the Americans aren't telling the locals anything."

"Not really."

He seemed satisfied with the answer.

"Even so, I'd like to learn more about the island. Driving around by myself only tells me so much."

Yūri finally relaxed enough to smile faintly.

"I guess that makes sense."

Tomoyuki felt himself relaxing as well.

Although Mishima still gave off an oddly mysterious impression, he no longer seemed dangerous.

Meanwhile...

Back at Camp Hansen, Joseph Keith returned from the island wearing an unmistakably irritated expression on his face.

2.

"So? Did you find the Witchblade wearer?"

"No."

His subordinates had already begun searching the villages, but the island was simply too small.

"There are only a handful of women on the island. We have security footage that gives us a rough idea of her height and build, but there are still no definite matches."

Michael spread several lists across the desk.

"Eighteen candidates."

"That's a lot."

"Too many."

Joseph frowned.

"Trying to identify someone who can disappear into civilian life is harder than expected."

He tapped the lists.

"Most are ordinary people. A sixteen-year-old girl in a sanatorium. A chronically ill student. A seventy-five-year-old woman..."

He sighed.

"If we act carelessly, word will reach the U.S. Navy command."

"And NSWF?"

"They'd notice immediately."

He folded his arms.

"We need a separate line of communication before Neural Gear becomes practical. Once that happens, governments and corporations around the world will compete for it."

Michael nodded.

"So, the Witchblade comes first."

"Exactly."

Joseph leaned back in his chair.

"Suppose we do establish that connection with NSWF. Once Neural Gear is commercialized, companies and governments will pay anything to acquire it. Even if NSWF collapses, someone else will simply step in."

Michael nodded.

"So, our first priority is figuring out how to deal with the Witchblade."

"Exactly."

"And have you learned anything?"

Michael hesitated.

"Not really. We've analyzed the Neural Gear brainwave data from subjects who went berserk, but we still don't know why the Witchblade resonates with them."

"Resonates?"

"Yes."

He pulled a photograph from the folder.

"The analysts think there's a common pattern. Nearly every berserk Neural Gear user shows an unusually strong reaction to women."

Joseph raised an eyebrow.

"They become attracted to women?"

"Not attraction in the ordinary sense."

Michael shook his head.

"More like... obsession."

He studied the photograph in silence.

The image showed the Witchblade's host—a woman of breathtaking beauty.

Her long violet hair framed a face that seemed almost unreal, while her golden eyes gleamed with an eerie brilliance.

Even in a still photograph, there was something unsettling about the faint smile lingering on her lips.

Joseph let out a low whistle.

"I can see why."

He flipped to the next report.

"Some of my men joked she'd make a fine pin-up, but frankly that isn't what concerns me."

"The Neural Gear users aren't reacting with ordinary desire. It's instinctive."

"Explain."

"They behave as though they're sensing some kind of pheromone—something that drives them into a heightened state of excitement."

Joseph frowned.

"So if sexual desire is tied to the berserk state..."

"...then suppressing the brain regions responsible for it might prevent the rampage."

Michael climbed to his feet.

"Unfortunately, it's not that simple."

He tapped a diagram of the human brain.

"The regions governing aggression and sexual instinct lie very close together."

He paused.

"Neural Gear users aren't merely stronger than ordinary humans. Their physical capabilities increase severalfold."

"But."

"They also lose rational judgment."

"The primitive parts of the brain begin taking over."

He pointed to another section of the diagram.

"If we suppress the sexual centers, we risk impairing vision or motor control as well."

"So ,we'd cripple them."

"Exactly."

Joseph folded his arms.

"That's unacceptable."

He stared out the window for a long moment.

"At the very least, I have no interest in creating wild animals."

Michael resumed.

"So, improving the control chip is still our best option."

"Can it be done?"

"It should increase the control signal by roughly fifty percent."

"But?"

"We don't know how the Witchblade will react if someone carrying the improved chip gets close to her."

He shrugged.

"If they're too far away, Neural Gear won't activate."

"But if they get too close..."

"...they might still go berserk."

Joseph grimaced.

"Half measures won't solve anything."

Michael nodded.

"That's why I've been considering another possibility."

"What is it?"

"If we can persuade the Witchblade user to cooperate instead of fighting us..."

Joseph blinked.

"You think she'd willingly help?"

"Perhaps."

He leaned forward.

"Imagine this."

"We recruit one of the islanders."

"Enhance them."

"And use that person as an intermediary between us and the Neural Gear subjects."

Joseph slowly smiled.

"Interesting..."

"It might actually work."

Joseph laughed softly.

"Enhanced humans..."

"So that's what we're calling them now?"

Michael smiled back.

"'Neural Gear' refers to the technology."

"'Enhanced humans' refers to people whose bodies have been strengthened through drugs and cybernetic surgery."

He continued.

"They're stronger."

"They're faster."

"They can be directed more easily."

"If we gather criminals or fugitives, enhance them, and let them loose where we need chaos..."

Joseph finished the sentence for him.

"...then ordinary civilians armed with rifles wouldn't stand a chance."

"Exactly."

"And if a sudden outbreak occurs somewhere, we'd have the perfect excuse to deploy troops."

Michael nodded.

"It gives us a convenient point of intervention."

He paused.

"And once an enhanced human begins taking the drug regularly..."

"...they'll never return to normal."

Joseph's smile faded.

"So, they're dependent."

"The drug rewrites the body."

"If they stop taking it..."

"...they die."

Silence filled the room.

Finally, Joseph said quietly,

"A disposable army."

Michael didn't answer.

He didn't need to.

Joseph looked thoughtful.

"I see."

"So, the key is persuasion."

"If we can't completely control them by force, then perhaps we can convince them to cooperate."

Michael nodded.

"It's certainly a possibility."

He glanced toward the window.

"The Witchblade user has already shown she's capable of reason. If we approached her directly instead of treating her like an enemy..."

"...there might still be room for negotiation."

Joseph slowly nodded.

"Then we'd need someone who could earn the trust of the islanders."

Michael smiled.

"I've already thought of that."

"One of the local residents."

"Enhance them."

"And make them our bridge."

Joseph folded his arms, considering the proposal.

"Hmm..."

"It may actually be feasible."

"If we choose the right person."

"Someone respected."

"Someone the villagers already trust."

Michael's smile widened.

"Exactly."

Joseph's expression gradually hardened.

"Then proceed."

"But be careful."

"If this operation fails..."

"...we won't get a second chance."

Michael nodded solemnly.

"I understand."

Three days remained until the Niraikanai Festival.

That evening, as always, Tomoyuki pedaled his bicycle toward the sanatorium.

Even though it was summer vacation, Yūri still spent most of her time reading books borrowed from the library.

Her doctor wouldn't allow her to swim because of her condition, so reading had become her greatest pastime.

Now that the weather had cooled slightly, Tomoyuki had started riding his bicycle again, borrowing new books and carrying them to the sanatorium.

Normally he wasn't allowed to give Yūri rides on the bicycle.

Even in his healthy condition, carrying another person over the island's hilly roads was exhausting.

Still...

For Yūri...

That much effort was well within what he considered worthwhile.

After all, until recently he hadn't even imagined she'd be able to do something as ordinary as this.

Simply seeing Yūri smile with genuine happiness as the wind brushed through her hair made every aching muscle worthwhile.

A blue passenger car gradually pulled alongside her.

The driver's window slid down.

"Hey, Tomoyuki."

A man said with one raised hand.

When he looked over, he saw Mishima Haruo leaning casually against the driver's door.

"Hello, Mr. Mishima."

"Heading to the sanatorium again?"

"Yes."

"You really are devoted."

He smiled.

"I've gotten to know you and Yūri pretty well lately."

At first, they'd both remained wary around him.

Now, though, they greeted him like an old acquaintance whenever they met.

Tomoyuki had even started calling him by name.

To anyone else, Mishima still carried an air of mystery.

But with the two teenagers, he had become surprisingly easy to talk to.

"So where were you today?" Tomoyuki asked.

Mishima pointed toward the island's northwest.

"I went to see the old Ryūkyū ruins."

"Any luck?"

"Not much."

"I also stopped by the port where ferries leave for Kumejima."

He laughed quietly.

"I'd been wondering whether people who work for companies in Tokyo really get enough vacation to spend weeks wandering islands like this."

Tomoyuki couldn't help laughing.

"I've been wondering something," Mishima said.

"What is it?"

"Wouldn't you get bored living on such a tiny island?"

Tomoyuki tilted his head.

"Bored?"

"There's hardly anything here."

"No shopping districts."

"No movie theaters."

"No amusement parks."

He spread his hands.

"If I stayed here for a month, I'd probably run out of things to do."

Tomoyuki smiled.

"Maybe."

"But tourists and vacationers always say things like that."

He looked toward the sea.

"We don't think of it that way."

"For us..."

"...this is home."

He paused.

"And besides..."

"I'm having plenty of fun."

Mishima chuckled.

"I suppose that's because you're surrounded by friends."

"And because Yūri's here."

Tomoyuki's cheeks immediately turned pink.

"W-what makes you say that?"

"You looked happier the moment you mentioned her."

He looked away in embarrassment.

"I..."

"...maybe."

Mishima laughed warmly.

"You don't have to be embarrassed."

"It's obvious."

They drove together toward the sanatorium.

Mishima had become fond of driving around the island.

Since large portions of the western coast lay inside the U.S. military training grounds, he couldn't circle the entire island.

Even so, he enjoyed simply cruising along the accessible roads.

After dropping Tomoyuki off, Mishima watched him disappear through the gates before driving away once more.

As Tomoyuki walked toward the building, he found himself smiling.

(*I wonder how Yūri's doing today.*)

Recently she'd started worrying about Yūri in a different way than before.

Not merely because of her illness.

He wanted Yūri to recover.

Of course he did.

But he also found herself wishing that Yūri herself wouldn't change.

The cheerful laughter she'd begun showing...

The brighter expressions...

The warmth she'd gradually started revealing...

Tomoyuki treasured every one of them.

That was why he caught himself avoiding certain subjects whenever they talked.

he was afraid.

Afraid that if Yūri learned too much...

...she might disappear from his life.

It was an irrational fear.

Yet ever since Mishima had entered their lives, it had quietly settled somewhere deep inside his heart.

Inside the sanatorium...

Yūri looked up from the book she'd been reading.

"You're late."

Tomoyuki laughed.

"Sorry."

"I ran into Mr. Mishima again."

"Oh?"

"He gave me a ride part of the way."

Yūri smiled gently.

"He seems like a nice person."

"He does."

"But..."

Tomoyuki hesitated.

"Sometimes..."

"...I still feel like there's something mysterious about him."

Yūri closed her book.

"I know what you mean."

"But maybe that's just because he's from Tokyo."

The two of them laughed together.

Outside...

Mishima's car rolled quietly away from the sanatorium.

He drove slowly through the winding roads.

As always, the western half of the island remained inaccessible because of the American military training grounds.

The restricted area stretched on in silence beyond the fences.

Mishima's cheerful smile gradually disappeared.

His expression became thoughtful.

There are still too many unanswered questions.

The Witchblade...

Neural Gear...

The American military...

How are all of these connected?

He tightened his grip on the steering wheel.

Soon enough...

I'll find out.

Meanwhile, Tomoyuki sat beside Yūri, happily describing everything that had happened during the day.

He carefully avoided mentioning the more unsettling subjects.

Not because he wanted to lie...

...but because he didn't want Yūri to worry.

Lately, that had become his habit.

She wanted Yūri to smile.

To laugh.

To enjoy what little ordinary happiness she had found.

If that meant quietly carrying the worries himself...

...then so be it.

As the evening sunlight streamed through the sanatorium window, the two of them continued talking together.

Outside, the island remained peaceful.

But unseen beneath that peaceful surface...

...the gears of a much larger conflict had already started turning.

3.

There was no sign of Yuri anywhere nearby.

The greatest mystery was that, somehow, Yuri had been there on the night of the Starlight Festival.

What exactly happened there?

As the question kept nagging at him, Tomoyuki found himself wanting to see the place again.

After taking Yuri to the hospital, he deliberately left his usual route home by bicycle and headed into the forest.

There were no maintained trails there, making it difficult to ride a bicycle through, and ever since hearing the rumors about the Cyborg soldiers he had made a point of staying away. Even so, curiosity ultimately won.

Could the Majin and those Cyborg soldiers have had something to do with Yuri suddenly recovering?

There was no proof, but he could not shake the feeling.

By the time he reached the narrow forest path where Yuri had collapsed, he looked around cautiously.

Nothing.

The fallen tree had already been cleared away, erasing almost every trace of what had happened.

"*Maybe I really did imagine it...*"

Just as the thought crossed his mind, and he turned back toward his bicycle—

Something burst out from deep within the woods.

"What the—?!"

The figure that emerged before him was a Cyborg soldier nearly 2 meters tall.

Its appearance was completely different from the one Tomoyuki had seen earlier. Its left arm had been enlarged to nearly thirty centimeters thick, giving it a grotesquely powerful build.

Five Marines in camouflage uniforms followed behind it.

Four carried M16 or M4 assault rifles.

The fifth wore a monocular head-mounted display over one eye and held some sort of electronic device in his hand.

"Number Eleven. Capture him."

The Cyborg soldier immediately closed the distance and seized Tomoyuki's wrist.

"So strong...!"

He struggled with all his might, but it was useless.

No matter how desperately he twisted and pulled, the Cyborg's grip did not budge.

Trying to escape was like a toddler wrestling against a full-grown adult.

One of the Marines stepped forward.

"...A New Soldier? No... Wait. Why is he talking to a civilian carrying American military equipment?"

Another Marine answered coldly.

"There's no need to ask questions. Before long, he will become another violent enhanced human anyway."

"What do you mean by that?"

Instead of answering, the soldier reached for a pair of restraints.

"Perfect timing. We've got another specimen. Tie the boy up."

The Cyborg shoved Tomoyuki forward.

Tomoyuki gritted his teeth and continued walking only because he had no choice.

At that moment—

A shadow flew out from the trees.

The Marine who had noticed it reflexively tried to raise his rifle.

Too late.

The newcomer slipped behind him, twisted his arm, and forced him to release the restraints.

The Marine cried out in pain as his arm was thrown aside.

At the same time, Tomoyuki's wrist was freed.

"...Mishima?"

Tomoyuki stared in disbelief.

"Are you all right, Tomoyuki?"

"Mishima-san? How...?"

The mysterious figure was Haruo Mishima.

"There's no time to explain. Run!"

Another American soldier raised his M16.

Before he could fire, Mishima dragged the fallen Marine in front of him as a shield.

Unable to risk shooting one of their own, the other Marines hesitated.

"Impressive..." one Marine muttered.

"Number Eleven! Capture that man!"

The New Soldier turned toward Mishima.

"...A New Soldier...? So, you've come out personally."

Although his face remained expressionless behind the sunglasses, there was unmistakable tension in his voice.

Apparently deciding Mishima himself was the greater obstacle, Number Eleven released Tomoyuki.

The instant Tomoyuki saw that opening, he ran.

"You there! Stop!"

Number Eleven immediately changed direction and charged after him.

He roared like a beast, throwing both arms wide as he rushed forward.

Terror alone would have frozen an ordinary person in place.

Tomoyuki, however, instinctively braced himself.

The New Soldier lunged.

Tomoyuki stepped in.

Rather than retreating, he closed the distance in a single motion, caught the Cyborg's right arm, pivoted with the momentum of the charge, and threw him cleanly over his shoulder.

The massive body slammed violently into the ground.

The watching Marines were stunned.

"W-what was that?!"

Tomoyuki himself was just as shocked.

I... I didn't think...

He hadn't consciously chosen any particular technique.

His body had simply moved on its own.

And somehow, he had effortlessly thrown a superhuman New Soldier.

The marine's order spurred the New Soldier into action, and he poured all his strength into his right arm.

"Ngh...!"

Seeing the strain on Mishima's face, Mishima realized the man was trying to wrench his arm free by brute force. With the overwhelming strength the New Soldier possessed, an ordinary person's arm would likely have been broken outright.

Even so, Mishima refused to let go.

The momentary hesitation gave the man in sunglasses enough time to level his rifle.

Faced with the muzzle now aimed directly at him, Mishima slowly raised both hands in surrender.

As soon as he did, rifles were trained on Tomoyuki as well.

"Since you've witnessed the New Soldier, we can't very well let you walk away. The two of you will be excellent test subjects for the Witch Blade."

"Witch Blade...? What is that?"

The man in sunglasses merely smiled, offering no answer.

Meanwhile, Tomoyuki clenched his teeth in frustration, but there was nothing he could do. The two of them were quickly surrounded and marched toward the waiting military vehicles.

4.

Yuri, who had been quietly reading in a chair, suddenly felt a sharp pain shoot through her wrist.

She stopped turning the page.

"...What is this feeling...? Could it be... someone's fighting?"

When she looked at the Witch Blade lying dormant beside her bed, its crimson core was glowing faintly.

It can't be... It feels so much like that Cyborg soldier from before...

"No... I don't want to become like that again! I don't want to fight anymore!"

Curling herself beneath the thin hospital blanket, she squeezed her eyes shut.

The shock of seeing Tomoyuki in danger...

The exhilaration she herself had once felt in battle...

The memories she had tried so desperately to bury came flooding back, bringing with them fear and revulsion.

Even now, her wrist throbbed harder and harder, as though urging her toward battle.

No... I don't want to think about it. I don't want to fight. I just want to feel normal...

No... that's not it.

These aren't my feelings.

I hated fighting. Even when I was forced into it, I never enjoyed it. The thrill... that savage delight... those weren't mine.

Maybe... the real me was always frail, and the Witch Blade merely drew out the violent instincts buried deep inside me.

Even as she tried to convince herself, the pain in her wrist intensified.

"*Please... stop...! At this rate... I won't be myself any longer...*"

Grinding her teeth, Yuri struggled desperately to suppress the Witch Blade before it could awaken again.

At that moment, she sensed the presence several figures approaching.

"...What?"

Seven people.

Two of them...

"I know them... Mishima-san... and Tomoyuki-kun!?"

Without thinking, Yuri leapt from the bed.

It can't be...

Closing her eyes, she focused her consciousness.

I knew it. Tomoyuki-kun and Mishima-san... they're surrounded by people I don't recognize.

The strongest presence among them almost certainly belonged to an American Marine.

Why are Tomoyuki-kun and Mishima-san together with American soldiers...?

A disturbing thought crossed her mind.

If that's true... then something may have happened to both of them.

Ordinarily they would simply be talking to the Americans.

Yet why could Yuri sense the Witch Blade?

The two had encountered Cyborg soldiers before.

I have to save Tomoyuki-kun.

I'm probably the only one who can.

But... if I become that thing again...

The memory of bathing in blood, intoxicated by slaughter, sent a wave of disgust through her.

Even so...

When she imagined Tomoyuki being hurt once more, her resolve finally hardened.

"I have to go save him!"

The instant she sprang from the bed, the red glow within the core flared brilliantly.

Her body was enveloped in crimson light.

Her ordinary clothes dissolved away, replaced by vivid scarlet armor.

From somewhere deep inside her, an overwhelming power surged forth with unmistakable force.

"*Ah... amazing... If it's the form that I am now... I feel like I can do anything.*"

The girl, now clad in armor, leapt out through the hospital window.

5.

By the time Tomoyuki and Mishima were loaded into the back of the waiting military truck outside the forest, darkness had completely fallen.

Two Marines sat opposite them with rifles resting across their knees.

Another occupied the driver's seat.

Tomoyuki and Number Eleven had been forced to sit on the truck bed. With both arms restrained by the Marines, there was no possibility of escape.

"Mishima-san... what's going to happen to us?"

"No idea. But whatever they're calling the Witch Blade... it can't mean anything good."

"So... what exactly is this Witch Blade?" Tomoyuki whispered.

Mishima answered in the same hushed voice.

"I only realized what was going on after seeing this situation. Remember what I told you? *If they find out you're one of the New Soldiers, you'll be disposed of.*"

Without turning his head, Mishima moved only his hands, careful not to draw the soldiers' attention.

With his hands bound behind him and guards watching every movement, escape seemed impossible.

Still, one thing had become clear from what had happened earlier.

"If Number Eleven hadn't shown up, Mishima-san would have beaten these American soldiers."

It was an unbelievable thought, yet it was the only explanation.

Just who is this man...?

American military training alone couldn't account for such skill.

As Tomoyuki wrestled with his growing unease, the truck suddenly lurched into motion.

His heart tightened.

At that instant, Number Eleven, who had been sitting perfectly still, murmured,

"...Now."

The moment the word left his lips, the New Soldier sprang to his feet without warning and began moving his body in tiny, deliberate motions.

The soldier wearing the head-mounted display continued manipulating the handheld terminal.

"Hm? What's wrong with him?"

Another Marine frowned.

"Looks like interference in Number Eleven's brain waves. Strange... I equipped him with the upgraded control chip."

The Marine seated directly across from Number Eleven kept working the controls while glancing up repeatedly.

Yet Number Eleven slowly shook his head from side to side, as though resisting something.

"Good... the synchronization is recovering..."

The words had barely left the soldier's mouth when Number Eleven suddenly roared in agony and clutched his head.

"Waaaaaaah!"

The other Marines instinctively turned toward him.

In that instant, the three drills mounted on Number Eleven's left arm whirred to life, spinning at tremendous speed.

Their shrill metallic scream echoed through the truck.

The spinning drills bit into the handheld terminal in the soldier's hands, shredding it like paper.

The truck screeched to a halt.

"Damn it! Number Eleven! If it's come to this, maximum output!"

As the soldier desperately manipulated another control device, Number Eleven suddenly hurled himself straight at him.

Instinct alone seemed to tell him that the person inflicting pain upon him was his true enemy.

"Gyahhhhhhh!"

The spinning drills plunged into the chest of the Marine wearing the head-mounted display.

In an instant, flesh and bone exploded apart.

Blood and chunks of flesh sprayed throughout the truck.

The drills were powerful enough to bore through rock or concrete.

Against the human body, they reduced everything to pulp.

"Tomoyuki! Get down!"

At Mishima's warning, both he and Tomoyuki immediately ducked behind the side of the truck bed.

The remaining two Marines jumped from the truck; rifles raised toward the berserk Number Eleven.

"He's out of control!"

One Marine fired a three-round burst from his M16.

The bullets struck Number Eleven's spinning drill arm.

Instead of penetrating, however, they shattered into tiny fragments the instant they touched the rapidly rotating drills.

Such was the astonishing destructive force of the triple-drill mechanism that even bullets were ground to dust.

Recovering his senses, Number Eleven lunged at the two Marines.

They split up, opening fire with their M16 and M4 rifles from opposite sides.

Meanwhile, Mishima whispered to Tomoyuki, who remained crouched low beside him,

"Tomoyuki, escape while you can."

"But my hands are still tied..."

"Don't worry about that."

As he spoke, Mishima casually slipped a small knife from beneath the strap of his wristwatch and cut through the rope binding the boy.

"That should do it. Hurry."

Number Eleven appeared to be completely out of control now.

This was their only chance.

Curious about what had become of the soldiers, Tomoyuki cautiously peered over the edge of the truck bed.

What he saw made him freeze.

"Gyahhhhh!"

The final Marine's dying scream echoed through the forest.

Number Eleven had impaled him with the spinning drills, reducing him to little more than torn flesh. Chunks of meat and blood were scattered everywhere, the bodies mangled so completely that they were scarcely recognizable as human.

"...L-let's go. Quickly."

Even as the horrific scene unfolded before his eyes, Mishima remained unnervingly calm.

Tomoyuki's face turned pale.

How can he stay so composed after seeing something like this...?

Even more frightening than Number Eleven's superhuman strength was Mishima's absolute composure in the face of such carnage.

Number Eleven let out a roar and came charging straight at Tomoyuki and Mishima.

"Damn... he found us!"

Mishima spun around and threw himself into Number Eleven's path, locking both arms around the Cyborg's left arm to stop the spinning drill from moving.

"Tomoyuki! Run! Get out of here while I hold him!"

"B-but..."

"Hurry! I can't keep him pinned forever...!"

Before Mishima could finish, Number Eleven lashed out with his right hand and violently flung him away.

"Mishima-san!"

Mishima tumbled across the sandy ground as though he had been swept aside by a landslide.

He staggered back to his feet, grimacing.

"Damn it... The difference in strength is too great!"

Number Eleven immediately spun the triple drills back to life and advanced on the two of them.

Looking at those drills, Tomoyuki realized there was no way they could block such an attack.

We're going to be killed...!

Just as the Cyborg's left arm came crashing down, Tomoyuki squeezed his eyes shut.

A shrill metallic screech rang out above him.

When he cautiously opened his eyes, an unbelievable sight greeted him.

A girl clad in crimson armor, her eyes gleaming gold and her body covered in scales like a reptile's hide, stood before them.

With the long sword in her right hand, she had stopped the spinning drills.

"...Majin..."

The image was strangely familiar.

No—it shouldn't have been. Yet the girl before him was exactly the one Tomoyuki had seen in the forest before.

She and Number Eleven immediately began exchanging furious blows.

Her blade struck the spinning drills again and again, scattering showers of sparks.

What astonished Tomoyuki most was that the sword wasn't being pulverized.

The girl had realized she couldn't overpower the Cyborg with brute force alone. Instead, she deftly redirected Number Eleven's attacks, causing the drills to lose momentum.

Number Eleven leapt back to widen the distance.

The armored girl did the same, the two of them circling sideways, watching each other's every movement without lowering their guard.

At that moment, the girl glanced toward Tomoyuki.

"...Huh? No way..."

Tomoyuki's heart skipped a beat.

Until then he hadn't noticed, but now that she was close enough, something about her silhouette—the shape of her hair, the color of her eyes, the expression hidden beneath the armor—felt unmistakably familiar.

Yuri...? Could it really be Yuri?

But before he could ask, Number Eleven roared and charged once more.

"Crush her! Grind her into pieces with the drills!"

The Cyborg rushed forward with the spinning drills and swung the sword in his right hand at the same time.

The girl was struck by the rapidly rotating drills and sent flying backward.

Even so, she immediately twisted in midair and landed on her feet several meters away, putting distance between herself and the others.

Even to Tomoyuki, it was obvious that she held the advantage.

She smiled with unabashed confidence, showing no concern for the enemy's overwhelming strength.

Number Eleven attacked again, but she calmly deflected every blow.

Heh... I didn't think I'd actually enjoy this...

The words were quiet enough that only she could hear them.

The violet-haired girl smiled serenely.

So that really is Yuri...

Tomoyuki stared at her in disbelief.

The Yuri he knew had always been gentle, frail, and kind to everyone.

She hated conflict.

Yet the girl standing before him seemed to revel in this life-and-death struggle.

If this really was Yuri, it was hard to believe.

"Mishima-san... that Witch Blade the Americans were talking about..."

"The Witch Blade is the strongest weapon ever created—one that possesses a will of its own. Yuri-kun is its current bearer."

"What...? Yuri?"

Tomoyuki shook his head.

"It can't be... The Yuri I know isn't like this."

"You've only ever known the Yuri who returned to normal after removing the armor."

"...What?"

Mishima looked at him quietly.

"Tell me, Tomoyuki. Just who do you think she was before all this?"

"I'll explain later. For now... just watch. This is part of my mission too."

Still unsure what Mishima meant, Tomoyuki turned back to the battle.

By now it had reached its final stage.

The girl had completely read Number Eleven's movements, avoiding every attack from the spinning drills with room to spare.

I only thought this might be a little fun... but this is already boring.

Whether Number Eleven understood her words or not, he gave a hoarse roar and lunged again.

Yuri stepped straight into his reach.

With a single fluid stroke she swept her sword sideways, passing by the Cyborg's flank.

"Huh...?"

Number Eleven stopped.

The girl had already walked past him, her back turned.

Its meaning became clear to Tomoyuki a moment later.

Number Eleven's upper body slowly turned toward the girl.

His lower body, however, remained facing forward.

The reason soon became obvious.

His torso had already been severed cleanly in two.

"...Ah..."

The spinning drills ground to a halt.

Number Eleven let out one final, broken cry before collapsing.

Yuri stepped forward without hesitation.

With a single effortless swing, she split the upper half of the fallen Cyborg as though cutting through firewood.

An explosion followed.

Flames, sand, and dust billowed into the air.

Tomoyuki instinctively shielded his face with his arm.

When the smoke cleared, Yuri lightly landed on the ground.

The blaze illuminated the night behind her as she slowly walked toward Tomoyuki and Mishima.

Her right arm was still transformed into the Witch Blade, stained with blood and oil that reflected the firelight with an unsettling shimmer.

Watching her approach, Tomoyuki felt a cold sweat run down his back.

If Yuri still isn't herself...

He had no idea what she would do next.

After all, she possessed enough power to overwhelm even a New Soldier.

If she turned that power on them...

It lasted only a few seconds.

Tomoyuki looked up at the girl who had stopped in front of him.

The scales covering her body unraveled like loosened threads, flowing back into her hand.

Within moments she returned to her ordinary appearance.

The real Yuri looked at him with sorrow in her eyes.

"Tomoyuki... I'm sorry for keeping this from you all this time. Ever since the Harvest Festival... I've been living with the Witch Blade."

As she spoke, she rolled up the sleeve on her wrist, revealing the bracelet.

At her words, the mysteries that had haunted Tomoyuki finally began to fall into place.

"So... that's why you got better?"

"Yes. Thanks to this. But Tomoyuki... you hate me now, don't you? After seeing me like that... enjoying a fight..."

"Yuri..."

For an instant, Tomoyuki almost thought she might kill him.

Not because of her transformed appearance or the cruelty she had displayed.

He knew she had fought Number Eleven to protect them.

Yet the one who had suffered most from becoming that thing was Yuri herself.

Tomoyuki realized that before anyone else.

"I'm sorry... I..."

Yuri turned away without even noticing the boy's expression.

"I don't know where I'm supposed to go anymore."

"I don't understand... but you're still Yuri."

Tomoyuki's voice rang out with unexpected conviction.

"I trust you."

Yuri turned back, wearing a look of surprise.

"...Even after seeing me like that?"

"Because you're Yuri."

The simple words carried every feeling he had been unable to express.

Tears welled in the girl's eyes.

A single thought now filled Tomoyuki's heart.

Maybe Yuri's illness really has been cured.

According to Mishima, the Witch Blade was the strongest weapon ever created—one with a will of its own.

It was impossible to understand.

Yet if transforming was what allowed Yuri to remain healthy...

Tomoyuki slowly extended his hand toward her.

Yuri hesitated for a moment, then gently placed her own hand in his.

Smiling through tears, she whispered,

"Tomoyuki..."

Just before their fingertips could fully meet, however—

The color drained from Yuri's face.

As though the strings holding up a puppet had suddenly been cut, she collapsed limply into Tomoyuki's arms.

"Yuri! Hey... Yuri!"

He frantically caught her and shook her shoulders.

But no matter how desperately he called her name, Yuri lay utterly still.

She made no attempt to open her eyes.

Chapter 4: Attack

1.

Early the next morning, the attending physician emerged from Yuri's hospital room to speak with Tomoyuki and Mishima.

"It looks like Yuri's condition has stabilized."

The boy let out the breath he had been unconsciously holding.

Thank goodness...

The night passed.

"Her pulse and breathing have weakened considerably, but they've finally settled down. At this point, I don't think she's in immediate danger. Still... what exactly

happened yesterday evening? She was perfectly fine, and then she suddenly suffered an attack severe enough to bring this on."

Neither Tomoyuki nor Mishima answered.

They had stayed beside the unconscious girl from the moment she had been brought into the third ward until dawn.

In the end, neither of them had slept.

The truth was something no ordinary person could possibly believe.

Even if they told him, it would sound like a fantasy—or worse, the ravings of someone delusional. There were simply too many secrets involved, and anyone who hadn't witnessed it firsthand would never accept it as reality.

Thinking that, Tomoyuki chose instead to change the subject.

"Doctor... will Yuri be able to attend the Niraikanai Festival?"

The physician frowned.

"Honestly, that will be difficult. Rather than worrying about the festival, I'd like to transfer her to the main island hospital as soon as possible and investigate what's causing these episodes."

"Could... could I talk to Yuri for a little while?"

"For a short time, perhaps. But don't stay too long. She needs her rest, and I still have other patients to see. Please keep your visit brief."

Receiving the doctor's permission, Tomoyuki and Mishima entered Yuri's room.

The moment Yuri noticed the two of them, a faint flush returned to her otherwise pale face.

"Tomoyuki... Mishima... I'm sorry for causing you so much trouble."

"It's fine," Tomoyuki smiled. "Besides, Mishima and I helped because we wanted to."

Back then...

He had nearly told her that.

That they had fought together.

That he understood now.

But before the words could leave his mouth—

Mishima spoke first.

"They're taking the American soldiers to a military facility. Apparently, they were being turned into enhanced humans."

"Enhanced... humans?"

"Those Cyborg Soldiers—New Soldiers, they called them. Apparently, the drugs were only the first step in strengthening the human body to its limits. They referred to that state as an 'enhanced human.'"

"I see... Is that what they were?"

Tomoyuki listened while Mishima answered in his place.

"And Yuri... how much do you know about the Witch Blade?"

At Mishima's question, Yuri blinked in surprise.

"Huh...? Why are you asking me that? Mishima... who exactly are you?"

Mishima gave a wry smile.

"Surprised? The truth is, I'm a special investigator."

He continued matter-of-factly.

"My official affiliation is the **Domestic Intelligence Investigation Office**. Publicly, we're a Japanese government agency responsible for gathering and analyzing intelligence at home and abroad. In reality, though, our organization extends far beyond that. Officially, many parts of it remain classified, but behind the scenes we work with foreign intelligence services—including the CIA—to investigate extraordinary incidents. So, it wouldn't be strange for someone in my position to know about the Witch Blade."

"...so, by collapsing in front of you, they had finally been freed."

Perhaps that was why. At the investigator's words, the girl's tense expression softened ever so slightly.

"So... what exactly is a Witchblade? I tried looking into it myself, but I couldn't make much sense of it."

"You already understand one thing," Mishima replied. "That it's a weapon with a will of its own."

She gave a silent nod.

"The truth is that we possess very little documentation on the Witchblade ourselves. We don't know the details. What we *have* confirmed is that it has existed in the shadows throughout history, appearing in countless wars, and that only a select few women have ever been chosen to wear it.

"In other words, Yuri was somehow compatible with the Witchblade. As for what determines that compatibility... no one knows."

Mishima shrugged.

"Even within the Bureau, only a handful of people have actually seen a Witchblade firsthand. The first was the man in sunglasses you met. But even he doesn't know very much.

"The people who once wielded the Witchblade all disappeared sooner or later. Apparently, they concealed its existence completely before vanishing."

"...and in the end, every attempt to monopolize it failed. Eventually the Witchblade itself disappeared."

"...Then... what exactly is happening to my body?"

At Yuri's new question, Mishima's normally unreadable expression shifted ever so slightly.

"According to our records, the Witchblade's overwhelming power doesn't merely affect the wearer's body—it becomes a blade that gradually consumes her very soul. You... may be a case like that."

"So... what does that mean? Please tell me."

The girl pressed him desperately. Mishima let out a long sigh.

"This is only a hypothesis based on medical reports and what little documentation we possess."

While recovering, Yuri had read what little information they had gathered about the Witchblade.

If her own theory was correct, then the Witchblade was shortening her lifespan, consuming a portion of her life force every day.

So that's what the Witchblade has been doing to me...

Yet after hearing the story yesterday, she realized she could no longer dismiss it as merely a cruel twist of fate. It wasn't simply that the Witchblade arbitrarily sought battle.

If Mishima's hypothesis was correct, then everything about the girl's illness fit together.

More than anything, the faint hope lingering somewhere deep inside her—that perhaps the Witchblade might perform some miracle—crumbled away in an instant.

Even so, Yuri showed almost no outward sign of shock.

"I knew it..." she murmured quietly.

"Yuri... you already knew?"

The little girl gave a small nod.

"I figured I wouldn't live very long anyway.

"Neither Tomoyuki, nor Sensei... not even my father or mother would tell me what was wrong. But I understood. It was my own body."

Tomoyuki found himself speechless.

Long before the Witchblade had chosen her, Yuri had always worn a gentle smile.

Despite being frail, she had vividly smiled every day, unaware that death had already been waiting patiently for her.

So that's why...

That's why she'd always smiled as though she'd accepted everything...

Because she knew her short life was already running out...

"I just thought... maybe I wouldn't get to live very long."

Yuri smiled faintly.

"So, I wanted to get better! I wanted to go with you and Mirai to the festival!"

Unable to hold back any longer, the little girl cried out.

"Tomoyuki..."

She looked at him with tear-filled eyes.

"I want you to come to Tokyo and stay under our protection.”

"The truth is, I've been ordered to protect Witchblade users."

The investigator turned toward Tomoyuki.

"You mean... protect them?"

"It sounds noble enough. But in reality, the Americans have long suspected something else.”

"As long as someone continues using the Witchblade, Yuri's remaining lifespan will continue to diminish.”

"There has never been a recorded case in which someone escaped that fate. But the analyses conducted at our research facilities suggest there may be a way to remove the Witchblade.”

"If that's possible... then perhaps she could live longer than she would now.

"I want to save this girl.”

"If that can be done..."

Tomoyuki finally understood what she had been trying to say.

Whenever Yuri activated the Witchblade, she wielded power beyond human limits. But each transformation burned away more of her life.

In other words, if the girl was to live even a little longer, she would have to stop pursuing the New Soldier from the island of Watariza.

If that was the case, taking Yuri back to Tokyo and making her a mere mascot would indeed be the safer choice.

"But after bringing her to Tokyo, the man from Special Investigations was the first person who truly treated Yuri like an ordinary girl.

"I know you care about her. You became close to us because you wanted to save Yuuri.”

"I understand how you feel. But right now, watching the two of you silently march toward such a tragic ending... that's painful."

"I want you to believe in yourselves."

Mishima looked back and forth between Tomoyuki and Yuri with complete sincerity. There wasn't the slightest trace of deception in his expression.

"...I understand."

After thinking quietly for a moment, Yuuri gave a small nod.

"Then... we'll leave early tomorrow..."

"I wanted to see the Mirai Kanai Festival tomorrow... That's why... I wanted to wait until the festival was over..."

She lowered her eyes sadly.

"But even so... your life..."

Yuuri looked at the investigator.

"You're saying... even if it's only once... you want Tomoyuki and me to see the Mirai Kanai Festival together?"

Overwhelmed by the girl's frail yet unwavering determination, Mishima opened his mouth almost without thinking.

"I understand. But if, the day after tomorrow, you're too weak to get out of bed, I'll have a helicopter sent for you immediately."

"Yuri..."

The girl answered with a tiny nod.

"Yuuri... I'm powerless. If only I could wear the Witchblade instead of you... then I'd be the one who could fight the New Soldiers."

"If I had even half your strength, I'd fight the New Soldier instead of letting you."

But that wish could never come true.

The problem had never been the Witchblade's host.

The women chosen to wield the legendary weapon said to be the strongest were all ordinary people.

Only the Witchblade itself decided who would wear it.

Tomoyuki clenched the girl's small hand in his own.

"There isn't anything like that. Because you've been beside me... you've already given me more courage than anyone."

"Tomoyuki..."

Even holding her hand like this made him feel that somehow she could still be saved.

"Tomorrow... let's go to the Mirai Kanai Festival together, okay?"

Unable to stop the tears gathering in his eyes, Tomoyuki smiled broadly at the girl.

"Why? You're sick, and your life is so short... If the Witchblade really has a will of its own, then answer me!

Why did it have to choose Yuuri?"

The bracelet around her wrist gave no response.

It seemed utterly indifferent to the boy's anguish.

2.

Joseph stared blankly at the monitor in the command room.

"*Unbelievable... So that girl really is the Witchblade's bearer.*"

The image clearly showed a young girl who had removed the armor and was speaking to the boy.

The previous night, while pursuing the New Soldier and the Witchblade wielder who had destroyed the facility, Michael had happened to capture this footage with the truck's onboard camera.

"There can't be any mistake. The Witchblade bearer is... Yuri Miyazono."

Michael handed Joseph the accompanying dossier.

Yuri Miyazono, sixteen years old.

Suffering since childhood from an illness of unknown origin.

Transferred to Watariza Island ten years ago for treatment.

Since entering high school, her condition has worsened, causing frequent absences.

"When I first saw the footage, I thought my eyes were deceiving me," Michael said. "But Joseph couldn't disagree.

"The frail girl in the records and the girl in the footage are obviously the same person.

"And yet... the gap between her sickly appearance and the incredible combat ability displayed by the Witchblade is simply too great.

"Why would the Witchblade choose a girl whose body is this weak?"

No amount of reasoning could reveal the weapon's own will.

"I've heard reports that only six soldiers managed to break out alive... The problem is, those six men ended up slaughtering one another."

"So it wasn't enough merely to report this to headquarters. Perhaps the enhanced control chip has reached its limits."

"If something like this can happen... then we've created a monster."

Apparently, their attempt to use the improved chip to forcibly suppress the New Soldiers had instead driven them into complete chaos.

That was what had ultimately led to the soldiers turning on one another.

"And this time, besides the Witchblade bearer, another New Soldier survivor has appeared."

Michael pointed to the truck-camera footage.

"The boy with the girl seems to know the Witchblade bearer."

"Ah, yes. We know who he is. He's Yuri Miyazono's boyfriend."

"Failing to eliminate him as part of the operation may have been our greatest mistake."

"What about the other man?"

"A traveler who has been staying on the island for the past several weeks. However, after looking into him, we still haven't uncovered anything suspicious..."

he footage alone wasn't enough to prove anything. The traveler had happened to encounter the man in sunglasses purely by chance. Even if he had fired at the New Soldier or the Witchblade bearer, there was no evidence he had acted together with them.

Still, his behavior was suspicious enough that Joseph couldn't simply dismiss him as an ordinary civilian.

"We can't just leave this alone... But what should we do? If we eliminate those two, we might also interfere with the New Soldiers."

"Besides, letting only the two of them know about it won't solve the problem. There's also the possibility that information about the New Soldiers has already leaked through them."

Joseph pondered his commander's words.

"We already have a fairly good grasp of what the Witchblade is capable of. We don't have the luxury of overlooking anything any longer."

"But I'd still like to recover more detailed data. We still can't determine just how much hidden potential the Witchblade possesses..."

Michael nodded in agreement.

"...Then perhaps tomorrow night. I hear there's a festival on the island. That might give us a good opportunity to lure the Witchblade bearer out and observe what she's capable of."

"What are you thinking, Michael?"

"I believe we may be able to kill two birds with one stone."

At those words, Joseph could no longer hide his surprise.

3.

On the evening of the Mirai Kanai Festival, Tomoyuki rode with Mishima in the car the investigator had rented, anxious all the way to the sanatorium.

Considering Yuri's condition, this outing had become something they could only hope for.

If her attending physician refused permission, the long-awaited trip to the festival would be canceled before it even began.

As of that morning, the doctor still hadn't made a decision.

How had she been feeling over the last few hours?

Caught between hope and fear, Tomoyuki hurried down the corridor toward Yuuri's hospital room with Mishima.

Just as he reached the door and was about to knock—

"Come in."

Yuri's voice drifted from inside.

Opening the door, Tomoyuki stopped in his tracks.

Standing there was Yuuri, dressed in a colorful floral yukata.

"Oh, Tomoyuki... Mr. Mishima, welcome."

The girl greeted them with a smile.

She looked a little pale, but her expression was bright, and she seemed more cheerful than usual.

Perhaps it was because she had pinned up her hair to match the yukata. The gentle elegance that surrounded her stood out even more than before.

Come to think of it...

Tomoyuki remembered something she had once said during the Harvest Festival.

"*I'd like to wear a yukata someday.*"

He hadn't imagined that the girl he'd met that day would actually be standing before him now in one.

"What's wrong, Tomoyuki? Why are you just staring?"

Yuri tilted her head.

"Huh? Ah... well..."

"You've never seen me in a yukata before..."

"Y-Yeah... It suits you."

The girl smiled shyly and lightly gathered the sleeve of her yukata into her hand, striking a small pose.

"What do you think?"

"I don't think I've ever seen anyone prettier."

Yuri puffed out her cheeks.

"What exactly is *that* supposed to mean?"

It was obvious she wasn't truly angry.

"Tomoyuki, it really does look wonderful on you."

At Mishima's words, Yuri's face immediately brightened.

"Thank you. My mother bought this for me a little while ago. I'd always wanted to wear it someday, so I'm really happy."

Just then, Yuuri's attending physician entered the room.

"So, you've finished getting changed? It really suits you. You're adorable."

"Th-Thank you very much."

The doctor smiled warmly at Yuri.

"Well then, enjoy yourself today. But don't overdo it."

"Yes. We'll be careful. Let's go, Tomoyuki."

Yuri reached for Tomoyuki's hand, and as the two left the room together with quiet smiles, Mishima started to follow.

"Mr. Mishima, could I have a word?"

The doctor stopped him.

"It won't take long."

Mishima turned back.

"To be honest... I never wanted to approve an outing in Yuuri's current condition."

"But she wanted it so badly...

Of everyone here, I'm the one who understands best that she doesn't have much time left."

Unable to bear denying the girl's simple wish—*I want to see the Mirai Kanai Festival*—the doctor had finally given his permission.

"If anything unusual happens to Yuri, please bring her back immediately."

The investigator gave a silent nod.

Then Mishima drove Tomoyuki and Yuri toward the festival grounds.

Unlike the Harvest Festival, the Mirai Kanai Festival centered on the beach south of the island, where prayers were traditionally offered to the sea beyond.

By the final evening of the festival, fishing boats decorated with lanterns would gather offshore, and people would send floating lights out across the water as offerings to Mirai Kanai.

Because it wasn't a tourist festival, there were fewer visitors than at the Harvest Festival.

Even so, with most of the island's residents—and many people who had returned home for the celebration—crowding the shoreline, it was still bustling with activity.

"Wow... This really feels like a festival!"

Yuri exclaimed, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

"Once the dancing starts, it'll be even livelier."

"Really? I'm getting excited."

Yuri looked at Tomoyuki with the wide-eyed innocence of a little child.

"Come on, let's go over there! Oh, Mr. Mishima, you should come too!"

At the girl's invitation, Mishima smiled wryly.

"I'd only get in the way of you two. I'll stay back a little."

Hearing that, Tomoyuki felt his cheeks grow warm.

Yuri, however, simply nodded with obvious interest.

As Tomoyuki and Yuri walked toward the waves together, islanders who recognized them greeted them one after another.

"Oh, isn't that Yuuri? A yukata—that's unusual."

"Miss Miyazono! Are you feeling all right? That yukata looks wonderful on you."

"It's rare to see that frail little girl at the festival. Then again, traditional Okinawan clothing isn't uncommon here, so mainland-style yukata are something of a novelty."

"Thank you very much. I'm feeling much better today."

Yuri returned every greeting with a smile.

Watching her speak so naturally with the people around her, Tomoyuki found himself overcome with complicated emotions.

Maybe she's still suffering...

And yet she's smiling so brightly...

When the Mirai Kanai Festival is over, Yuri may have to leave the island.

This may be the first—and the last—time she'll ever attend the festival with everyone.

The thought tempted him.

Maybe I should pull her away from the crowd right now... keep that smile all to myself...

...No.

Yuri looks happiest when she's laughing together with everyone.

Swallowing those selfish feelings, Tomoyuki quietly watched her mingling with the islanders.

Before long, the music of the flute rose, and people began moving toward the dance.

"Yuri, everyone seems to be heading over there."

"Yeah. They're calling us too."

When he spoke, she turned around.

"I'm glad we came."

She smiled softly.

She had said she would miss leaving the island.

Perhaps that was why.

She wanted to leave behind as many memories of the island as she could.

An American military facility had been built nearby, and as long as the New Soldiers remained stationed there, the Witchblade's bearer would inevitably be drawn into battle.

Even if it meant shortening her already brief life.

As the beat of the drums and the rhythm of the Okinawan sanshin echoed through the air, people gradually began to dance.

It looked spontaneous at first, but the movements had clearly been passed down through generations.

Children, adults, and the elderly alike joined the circle one after another, and before long the ring of dancers spread wider and wider.

Yuri didn't join them.

Instead, she watched with the pure delight of a child seeing something wonderful for the first time.

"Wow... It's even more amazing in person."

Watching the islanders dance so cheerfully, Yuri laughed.

"Mirai Kanai... I'd like to go there too someday."

"You can."

She looked toward Tokyo.

"If I get rid of my illness... then... maybe..."

She wanted to say more, but the words wouldn't come.

For Tomoyuki, simply holding back the tears threatening to spill over was all he could manage.

"Thank you, Tomoyuki.

"I finally feel like I've truly become one of the people of Watariza Island."

Unable to understand what she meant, Tomoyuki tilted his head.

"I always thought I'd just be watching.

"That I didn't belong among everyone at a festival like this.

"But..."

Tomoyuki realized what she was trying to say.

She had watched the Harvest Festival from the sanatorium every year.

She had wanted to come.

She had wanted to dance.

She had wanted to become one of the islanders.

Only now did he understand why she had wanted to see the festival so badly.

"I love this island.

"I love everyone here.

"So, wherever I go... I'll always find my way back."

As Tomoyuki looked at her, Yuri suddenly let out a tiny gasp.

"Ah..."

She pressed a hand against her wrist.

The crimson crest engraved around the bracelet had begun to glow faintly.

"Yuri?"

"...No...

"At this rate... it's going to awaken."

"The New Soldiers...?"

Yuri gave a silent nod.

"We have to get away from here. Right now."

As Tomoyuki hurriedly led her toward the parking area, Mishima immediately drove over to meet them.

"What happened?"

"The New Soldiers..."

"What? You can tell where they are?"

Yuri pointed toward the mountains.

"Over there...

"There are... a lot of them."

Tomoyuki stared in disbelief.

"That can't be..."

Most of the islanders were gathered here at the festival.

Only some of the elderly and a handful of others had remained in the village.

"If the New Soldiers attack now... there'll be civilian casualties."

"Yes. Not just one or two... a large number of people."

Mishima clicked his tongue in frustration.

It looks like the New Soldiers are preparing to launch a full-scale assault.

"What? You're going to fight? You have to protect the village!"

Seeing Yuri stagger as she tried to run forward, Tomoyuki hurriedly caught her by the shoulders.

"Wait, Yuri! If you transform in your condition..."

Her body was already at its limit. Anyone could imagine what would happen if she became the Witchblade's bearer now and tried to unleash that terrifying power.

Yet Yuri gently laid her hand over the boy's.

"Thank you for worrying about me, Tomoyuki. But... the only one who can defeat the New Soldiers..."

"...is me."

"Yuuri..."

"I've spent my whole life unable to do anything because of my illness."

"But now... I finally have something I can do for everyone on this island."

"So... I have to go."

The determination in her eyes silenced Tomoyuki.

She gave Mishima a small bow.

At once, the Witchblade's core began to shine brightly.

Her tied-up hair unraveled, cascading over her shoulders, while her clothing dissolved and transformed, enveloping her body.

Even as he watched her changing before his own eyes, Tomoyuki couldn't bring himself to stop her.

Once the transformation was complete, Yuri turned without another word and sprinted toward the village at a speed no ordinary human could ever hope to match.

Tomoyuki could only stand there in stunned silence, watching her disappear.

4.

Watariza Island's only village lay on a flat stretch of land nestled between low, forested hills.

Traditional Okinawan houses with red-tiled roofs lined the slope in a broad semicircle around the fishing harbor.

Normally the village would still be lively even after nightfall, but tonight most of the islanders had gone to the Mirai Kanai Festival, leaving the streets eerily quiet.

Shattering that silence, more than a dozen New Soldiers burst from the forest with guttural roars.

Watching them from the command vehicle, where Michael and Joseph stared intently at the monitors, Joseph smiled in satisfaction.

"They've taken the bait perfectly."

Michael remained expressionless.

"Witchblade... if she's looking for a fight, she'll have no choice but to show herself."

This operation had been built on a simple premise:

Most of the islanders would be gathered at the festival, leaving only a handful of potential targets behind in the village.

Even if Yuri—the Witchblade's bearer—managed to drive off the attackers, someone in the village would almost certainly die.

Watching an innocent girl murdered before her eyes...

How would that affect the Witchblade's power?

And by observing her latent abilities and unique characteristics, they would gather invaluable data for future research.

Furthermore, unlike the failed tests at Camp Toza, this would be a field test conducted outside the facility.

If the enhanced New Soldiers proved effective, it would kill two birds with one stone.

Michael considered it unlikely that Cyborg would realize the truth.

Even if he did, Michael had secretly ordered Yuri's surveillance team to monitor both her and Tomoyuki, and there was still no indication that they had contacted anyone outside the island.

Of course, there was no guarantee.

But once the necessary intelligence had been collected, Japan's jurisdiction would no longer matter.

Any loose ends could simply be erased.

Joseph turned his attention back to the monitor.

The New Soldiers had already entered the residential district.

Because their higher reasoning had been suppressed to the bare minimum, instinct drove them to seek out the nearest houses.

One of the Cyborg soldiers leapt high into the air, crashed through the red-tiled roof of a home, and plunged inside.

Another exhaled a stream of flame, engulfing a neighboring house.

The others scattered, attacking homes however they pleased.

An elderly man stumbled from the veranda of one house with a terrified cry.

Before he could take another step, another New Soldier appeared in front of him.

The old man's knees gave way as he stared at the monster in horror.

The creature slowly reached both hands toward his neck.

At that instant—

A black shadow flashed between them.

The New Soldier's upper and lower body separated cleanly in two.

The cyborg's corpse hung suspended for a heartbeat before exploding violently, scattering blazing fragments through the air.

The figure that emerged from the explosion was Yuri, clad in the Witchblade.

"..."

After confirming the old man was unharmed, she immediately turned and rushed off in search of the next enemy.

"We've found the Witchblade bearer!"

One of the soldiers shouted, and Michael manipulated the controls.

"I know. They're uncontrollable now anyway. Let them do whatever they want."

Yuri had crossed the village with astonishing speed.

The New Soldiers hadn't expected her to appear so quickly.

They had already lost interest in the Witchblade itself.

More than half had regressed into feral creatures driven only by instinct—obsessed with slaughtering the remaining villagers.

Only one instinct remained dominant over all others: the Witchblade's overwhelming urge to fight.

The nearest New Soldier lunged at Yuri.

She effortlessly slipped past its attack and sprinted toward the opposite side of the village.

Several Cyborg soldiers immediately turned and gave chase.

Behind her, the sounds of the festival had already faded into the distance.

I knew it.

They're after me... the Witchblade.

As long as I keep running, they'll keep chasing me. That means no one else in the village will get hurt.

The New Soldiers had all been modified differently, and their running speeds varied accordingly. Because they spread out as they pursued her, Yuri could defeat them one by one.

The path she had chosen also differed from the road leading to the clinic.

Although she had visited these woods several times before, she couldn't afford to ignore the terrain. With a nine-to-one numerical disadvantage, every little advantage mattered.

When the foremost New Soldier reached the middle of the forest, Yuri suddenly stopped.

The cyborg raised the longsword attached to its right arm and swung it down.

The distance was too short for the creature to dodge.

Its head split cleanly in two.

The cyborg exploded into fragments.

But Yuri had already leapt backward before the blast reached her.

Three more New Soldiers crashed through the trees in pursuit.

"*Good. I can beat them here, no matter how many it takes.*

Right now... all I want... is to fight."

As though drawn in by that simple desire, the three enemies attacked at once.

The first charged head-on, bringing down a club studded with vicious spikes.

Yuri caught it with the sword extending from her right arm.

At the same moment, the second New Soldier opened its jaws wide.

Inside its mouth, a nozzle like the muzzle of a cannon came into view.

Even if I can block the blade, taking those flames head-on is another matter.

The instant before it fired, Yuri thrust her sword into the cyborg's chest.

Her violet hair transformed into countless razor-sharp blades.

One tendril lashed out like a whip, piercing the creature's fuel tank.

The cyborg burst apart in flames.

The third attacker came from her left.

Its arms were grotesquely enlarged all the way to the fingertips.

It was clearly a model built for raw power.

Although both arms were covered in artificial skin, they possessed enough strength to crush a passenger car.

Yuri tried to stop the strike with her left arm.

The tremendous force overwhelmed her.

The spiked club she had caught was knocked aside, sending her slender body skidding across the ground.

"...!"

She let out a small cry as the discarded weapon gouged into the earth beside her.

I thought I could block it... but I was wrong.

Her footing wavered.

I can't believe... a blow like that actually hurt me.

My body really is weakened after all.

The delay had allowed the remaining New Soldiers to catch up, and in moments Yuuri found herself completely surrounded.

"*Two against one... no, make that one-legged odds?*"

Well... that's fine. This is still manageable.

Despite the desperate situation, a faint smile appeared on the girl's face.

Fear no longer dwelled within her.

Instead, an indescribable exhilaration welled up from somewhere deep inside.

Is this... the Witchblade's true nature?

The harder she was cornered, the stronger the feeling became.

"Ahh... this feels wonderful."

The seven cyborg soldiers advanced together.

Yuuri's crimson hair became a storm of blades and rushed toward them.

Four of them had their hearts pierced and died instantly.

"Good... only four left. Wonderful."

The moment the remaining strands returned to normal hair, the surviving New Soldiers scattered in every direction.

But Yuri immediately understood why.

One of them remained perfectly still, calmly observing her.

It was the New Soldier armed with the spiked club.

Unlike the others, it had received almost no modifications.

Its abilities were difficult to judge.

The only obvious weapon was the enormous boomerang more than a meter across that it held in one hand.

Ah... I want to fight.

I want to fight even more...

Driven by that overwhelming desire, Yuuri dashed straight toward the enemy.

Facing numerous opponents always placed the defender at a disadvantage.

The quickest way to seize the initiative was to sow confusion among them.

The one nearest Yuuri was the power-focused New Soldier.

A giant among giants, it possessed enough strength to knock an opponent unconscious with a single blow.

I'll take care of the troublesome one first.

Yuuri slipped into its embrace with blinding speed.

The cyborg raised its right arm.

"Gyahhhh!"

Its forearm fell to the ground, severed cleanly at the elbow.

At that instant, mechanisms hidden inside the arm sprang open.

The machine had concealed a flamethrower in its forearm.

Its gaping muzzle now pointed straight at Yuuri.

She thrust the short sword extending from her left arm into its open mouth.

The cyborg let out a shriek.

The remaining three New Soldiers moved simultaneously.

Something sliced through the air behind Yuuri with a sharp whistle.

It was the giant boomerang thrown by the stationary New Soldier.

Spinning at tremendous speed, it sheared through thin branches as it returned to its master after missing its target.

The weapon possessed enough destructive force to cut a person cleanly in two.

Its broad, leather-like wings gave it astonishing stability in flight.

This is getting... fun.

A thrill rose uncontrollably from the depths of Yuri's heart.

The taste of blood on her sword stirred the Witchblade's instinct for battle even further.

As she whirled through the air, something wrapped itself around her right arm.

Another New Soldier had extended a whip-like tendril from the palm of its hand, trying to ensnare her.

"Hah... something like this isn't enough to stop me!"

The moment she tried to cut through the whip wrapped around her with the short sword extending from her left arm, Yuri cried out in pain.

A powerful electric current surged through her entire body.

The Witchblade's blades... aren't perfectly insulated like rubber after all.

Or maybe it's because my body has grown weaker. Either way, the damage from electricity feels much worse than before.

The girl instinctively staggered backward.

The electric shock ceased almost immediately.

If she had been an ordinary person, a single strike would have killed her instantly.

So that was their plan.

The New Soldier wielding the boomerang had deliberately thrown the weapon instead of attacking at close range.

Yuri had dodged by leaping aside, but in doing so she crashed into another New Soldier, lost her balance, and fell to the ground.

Before she could recover, the New Soldier wielding the spiked club swung down at her.

Twisting her body, she barely avoided the spikes, using her left arm to deflect the weapon.

"...Damn it... So, taking a hit is finally catching up with me."

Until now she had only felt vaguely that the Witchblade's power was gradually fading.

Now it was impossible to ignore.

The Witchblade itself shrieked, refusing to yield its strength.

Seeing Yuuri's movements slow, the New Soldier carrying the boomerang attacked again.

This time she caught the whip wrapped around her arm in a firm grip.

With a sharp yank of her right arm, she pulled the whip's owner off balance.

At that instant, the boomerang missed its mark.

Yuuri severed the whip coiled around her right arm.

The boomerang sliced through the air.

"Ah... thanks for cutting me free."

She extended the blade from her liberated right arm.

Then she drove the longsword straight through the skull of the New Soldier holding the spiked club.

It died instantly.

"That leaves... three."

As she whispered the words, she sensed something falling from above.

Looking up, she saw a stream of translucent liquid pouring down from the dead cyborg.

Acid...?

The New Soldier clinging to the tree with monkey-like limbs possessed a mechanism that could spray powerful acid from its mouth.

"So... there's another one? I never noticed."

While Yuri looked up, the ape-like New Soldier vanished into the depths of the forest.

Taking advantage of the opening, another New Soldier extended a fresh whip from its palm and charged her again.

"Not falling for that twice."

Yuuri cut through the incoming whip with her sword.

Then, without slowing, she closed the distance in a single burst.

At that very moment, she sensed two boomerangs flying toward her from behind.

The New Soldier had hurled the weapon again.

Ordinary boomerangs lose their power after striking something.

These did not.

Their razor-sharp edges retained nearly all their force even after slicing through an ally, arcing back toward their master.

"Nice try."

The New Soldier whose body had been split by the boomerang burst into sparks and exploded.

Now there are only two left.

One was the boomerang wielder.

The other was the acid-spitting New Soldier specializing in covert operations.

Which should I deal with first?

The boomerang was clearly the more troublesome threat.

Yuuri turned and ran, presenting her back.

The boomerang spun toward her with frightening speed.

She dodged it by the narrowest margin, judging its position from the sound alone.

This is even more troublesome than I expected.

If she were out on the open beach, she could simply move in wide circles to avoid it.

But here, hemmed in by trees on both sides, its flight path was constrained.

That meant she could predict it from the sound—but it also meant escaping it without losing speed would be difficult.

Yuri darted deeper into the forest.

Of course, once among the trees the boomerang lost much of its usefulness.

Yet the New Soldiers carrying acid had anticipated that.

They had deliberately entered the forest after revealing the boomerang first.

Yuri had assumed she could remain hidden among the trees.

They had predicted exactly that.

The acid specialist advanced confidently toward her.

No matter how well she hid, it would be pointless.

As Yuri sprang from behind a tree, she charged straight at the approaching New Soldier.

The cyborg raised its boomerang.

But even a blade over a meter long is useless if it cannot be swung freely through thick woods.

Yuri slipped inside its reach.

With the short sword extending from her left arm, she slit the enemy's throat while it still held the boomerang raised.

Blood gushed from the wound as the cyborg collapsed.

Only one left now.

Just as she started searching for the final enemy, she sensed something hurtling toward her from an angle above.

The tips of her hair dissolved into liquid and scattered outward.

With a sharp hiss, the acid splashed across the ground instead.

Even if she were struck by the corrosive fluid, the Witchblade would likely prevent any truly fatal damage.

Still, when Yuri turned to where the acid had come from, the cyborg was already gone.

It hasn't changed its tactics. It intends to keep harassing me until it finds an opening.

To call it "dangerous" would almost be too rational a description.

It hunted less like a machine and more like a wild predator stalking wounded prey.

That's why it keeps changing positions after every attack, Yuri realized. *It's already learned how I react.*

The instant the acid rained down from the treetops again, she burst back onto the path and sprinted with everything she had.

Streams of acid pursued her relentlessly from above.

Dodging one volley after another, she continued running.

Eventually the forest thinned, opening onto rocky ground.

Beyond that lay the road leading toward the opposite shore.

Yuri crossed the road and finally left the forest behind.

By now she understood the approximate range of the New Soldier's acid attack.

As long as she remained beyond its reach, the enemy would have no choice but to reveal itself.

Of course, that also meant the cyborg would no longer have anywhere to hide.

Ordinarily, even a stealth-specialized New Soldier would never expose itself so recklessly.

But this one had abandoned caution entirely.

Its sole priority had become killing Yuri.

The moment she emerged from the forest, it sprang after her.

Yuri extended the sword from her right arm.

Closing the distance in one swift rush, she slashed cleanly through the enemy's torso.

There must have been an acid tank somewhere inside its body...

The fluid spilled from the severed wound, splashing over the New Soldier itself.

With a violent hiss, flesh and machinery alike began dissolving together.

Blood, oil, and melting metal dripped from its body.

The blade in Yuuri's right arm was also stained with the acid.

Yet before it could eat into the metal, she flicked it clean in a single motion.

The polished surface reflected the moonlight brilliantly.

"...Hmph."

Yuri gave a small snort.

Just as she relaxed and started to turn toward the road, the beam of a single headlight approached.

"Yuri!"

The familiar voice reached her ears.

The two who had arrived were Tomoyuki and Mishima.

The moment the car came to a halt, Tomoyuki hurried over in a panic.

"Yuri! Are you all right? You're not hurt?"

Only then did the Witchblade armor dissolve away.

Every ounce of strength drained from Yuuri's body, and she collapsed where she stood.

Tomoyuki caught her before she hit the ground.

But after exhausting herself so completely in the battle, she no longer had the strength even to stay conscious.

"Yuri...! Stay with me! Yuri!"

His desperate voice sounded strangely distant as darkness swallowed her.

5.

After recovering the unconscious Yuri, Tomoyuki and Mishima returned to the settlement before continuing on to the clinic.

The village itself had escaped catastrophe.

Although about half the homes had been destroyed or severely damaged, miraculously there had been no fatalities.

A number of people had suffered injuries while fleeing, but none were life-threatening.

The people of Watari Island treasured their traditions and were deeply superstitious.

Many of the elderly, especially those who had witnessed Yuri and the Witchblade with their own eyes, whispered fearfully:

"The Majimun has appeared."

In Okinawan folklore, *Majimun* are supernatural spirits or monsters, often said to dwell within trees.

There was also an old legend that spoke of **"the violet-haired one."**

Anyone who knew that legend could not simply dismiss Yuuri and the Witchblade as ordinary Majimun.

Recently, the Nirai Kanai Festival had repeatedly been disrupted by Majimun sightings.

Could this be the wrath of the gods?

When Mishima entered the community hall alone, one of the village elders spoke up before the assembled crowd.

"So that's it. Because of that purple-haired girl, no one died today... but perhaps this is the gods' warning that this year's Nirai Kanai Festival should be canceled. Maybe we should rethink the festival itself."

Another elder silently nodded in agreement.

To them, the New Soldiers were not soldiers from the American military.

They believed they were monsters.

Mishima wanted to expose the truth behind the enemy.

But if he did, he would inevitably have to explain Yuri as well.

"...Wait a minute!"

A young man suddenly stood up.

"What are you saying? You want to cancel the Nirai Kanai Festival?"

One of the elders glared at him.

"Weren't you listening? Didn't I just say we should cancel this year's festival and reconsider how it's held?"

"I heard you.

But if the Majimun really have appeared, shouldn't we continue the festival more faithfully than ever?"

His words had far more impact than anyone expected.

The deeply religious islanders began murmuring among themselves.

"It's true... The festival has only just begun. If we sincerely pray to Nirai Kanai over the next two days, maybe the Majimun really will disappear."

"No... What about the people whose homes were destroyed? Are we really going to carry on as if nothing happened...?"

The hall quickly filled with uneasy debate as the villagers struggled to decide whether fear or faith should guide them.

Before long, the villagers split into two camps—those who wanted the festival to continue, and those who insisted it should be canceled.

Naturally, Tomoyuki had argued for continuing it because he genuinely feared provoking the gods' wrath.

If the Nirai Kanai Festival is canceled now, Yuri may never have another chance to witness it. This year's festival could be the first... and the last. I can't let it end like this...

Those were the thoughts he kept to himself.

As the debate dragged on, the crowd gradually began to settle.

"So, just as Tomoyuki says, let's continue the Nirai Kanai Festival and offer our sincere prayers to the gods."

"That's not a bad idea."

When the village chief opened the meeting, voices of agreement rose one after another.

"Sounds good!"

"Let's do it!"

The elder who had opposed the idea slowly approached the boy.

Moved by the young man's earnest conviction, he smiled wryly.

"Heh... Perhaps you've got a point."

With the argument finally settled, Mishima returned to his car.

The girl sleeping in the passenger seat had already regained consciousness.

"Yuri... are you really all right?"

"Yeah. I'm just a little tired. Sorry for making you worry."

She answered with a faint smile.

Tomoyuki could tell she was forcing herself, but he chose not to press the matter.

"Then... will you come see the Nirai Kanai Festival tomorrow?"

At that, Yuri's expression clouded.

"What's wrong, Yuri?"

"Oh... it's nothing."

She smiled again.

"That's right. Let's watch the festival together tomorrow... and the day after, too, Tomoyuki."

Relieved by her cheerful answer, Tomoyuki smiled back.

Yet beneath that relief, a vague uneasiness lingered in his heart, refusing to fade.

6.

Joseph recovered every salvageable fragment of the New Soldiers before returning to Camp Toghzana.

Michael and Joseph entered the command office; the former quietly poured himself a glass of brandy.

The alcohol settled warmly in his stomach, easing some of the tension.

"So... this wasn't a complete failure after all."

Although the Witchblade user had inflicted some damage on the New Soldiers, only a single unit had been destroyed.

The others had merely suffered superficial damage because Joseph had deliberately selected models with lower combat performance rather than sacrificing his best machines.

"Joseph, will the combat data gathered from the Witchblade be useful?"

"Yes, sir. We should be able to install it into the test unit shortly."

Hearing that, Michael let out a satisfied breath.

"Good. Then the mission wasn't a total loss."

"However..."

Joseph hesitated.

"Recovering every remaining New Soldier is no longer possible. Even so, we've at least bought ourselves some time."

Fearing further attacks on the village, the Witchblade user had left one damaged unit behind in the settlement.

Recovering it would inevitably take time.

Sending troops into a populated area to retrieve it would only alarm the civilians and draw unnecessary attention to the base.

"And if the wreckage were thoroughly investigated, our involvement might come to light."

Joseph's words drew a heavy sigh from the Marine officer.

"Before that happens, we have to act."

Michael had spent years climbing the ranks.

Now he had his eye on promotion to base commander—and eventually to a senior post at Allied Headquarters.

An incident like this could destroy those ambitions.

"So how many New Soldiers are left?"

Joseph answered immediately.

"Including the new prototype, sixteen."

"Hm... Then leave the prototype behind and eliminate the remaining New Soldiers along with everyone on the island."

Michael's proposal caused Joseph's eyes to widen.

"...Do you realize what you're saying?"

"I do."

"If we silence every witness, the story becomes simple."

Those soldiers who died earlier would be remembered as heroes who fell fighting terrorists.

Then the official story would read like this:

A heavily armed terrorist organization suddenly attacked the small island, slaughtering its residents.

The military was immediately deployed, heroically defeating the terrorists despite suffering casualties of its own.

The fact that they had failed to prevent the massacre would be overlooked, and any questions about the delayed response from the nearby base would quietly disappear.

Instead, Michael Fines—the Marine officer who led the counterterrorist operation—would be celebrated as a war hero.

The defeat would be concealed, transformed into fame.

It was the sort of operation Michael excelled at.

The only concern was whether anyone on the island had encountered the Witchblade.

"If the New Soldiers run wild again, we'll have no choice but to abandon the islanders."

Joseph looked at him in disbelief.

"The Witchblade itself wasn't part of the original objective... but if sacrificing the island is what's required..."

"That could become a serious problem."

"But that concern is unnecessary. Yuri Miyazono is living at the clinic outside the village. Judging from the data we've gathered so far, the New Soldiers aren't close enough to react to the Witchblade."

"I suppose so... Besides, after the last battle, she must be badly exhausted. If we wipe out the village quickly, everything should be over before Miyazono even realizes what's happened."

"That's the plan. The operation begins tomorrow, before dawn—while the villagers are still asleep."

"So that's it. The assault will be tomorrow."

The president of Cyber Develop frowned in surprise.

"Wh-what? Isn't this awfully sudden?"

"Of course it is. If we drag our feet, this whole plan could collapse. Before Yuuri Miyazono recovers, we'll settle things once and for all."

"What about the New Soldiers that are still undergoing functional adjustments...?"

"Wake every one of them immediately—every New Soldier except the prototype. Prepare them for a full-scale assault."

Michael rose from his chair and pressed the intercom button, summoning his subordinates.

Chapter 5: Transformation

1.

Shortly before one in the morning, Yuri quietly slipped out of the clinic.

Since everyone was asleep, there was little chance anyone would notice her movements.

Still, the unfamiliar tension lingering in her body made every step feel unsteady.

She had no time to stand there worrying.

After walking a short distance, she spotted Mishima's blue passenger car beneath the moonlight, its headlights off.

Noticing the girl, Mishima leaned out of the driver's window.

"Yuri! Sorry I'm late."

"No, it's fine. More importantly... are you feeling all right?"

"I'd love to say yes, but we don't have time."

Yuri climbed into the passenger seat.

"So... are you really going through with this?"

"Of course."

The girl nodded and looked at the man behind the wheel.

"I was just about to ask you the same thing. Mishima, do you really intend to attack the American military base just to protect everyone on the island?"

By the time Tomoyuki woke up, Yuri had already begun discussing a different matter with Mishima—the future of the Nirai Kanai Festival.

Major Michael Fines had intended only to destroy the village.

The Witchblade's power had ensured there were no civilian casualties beyond several homes being destroyed, and all of the New Soldiers had been eliminated.

That alone should have been enough.

Yet the man who had authorized such an operation was unlikely to leave matters there.

What's more, some villagers had witnessed both the New Soldiers and the Witchblade.

If the girl simply left the island now, there was every chance the enemy would launch another attack to eliminate those witnesses.

If that was inevitable, perhaps it would be better to seize the initiative instead.

Mishima had no objection.

A girl transformed by the Witchblade would infiltrate Camp Toghzana while, in secret, an undercover investigator from Cyber Develop gathered evidence of the Marines' collaboration with the company.

Once the proof had been secured, the whole affair would come to an end.

"However... if you activate the Witchblade again, and they send more New Soldiers after the village, your body..."

"I know. But if that's what happens, then I'll choose the path that gives the village the best chance of surviving."

There was no need to explain further.

Mishima should already have understood what she meant.

In truth, Yuri's plan also worked to his advantage.

The Witchblade incident had already become the company's highest-priority crisis.

Furthermore, even if Mishima requested military intervention, approval from headquarters would almost certainly take hours.

If they delayed preparations any longer, it would be too late.

"But, Tomoyuki... please don't let him get involved any further."

Yuri's quiet request hung in the air. She had no desire to drag him any deeper into the conflict that had engulfed her.

If Tomoyuki heard the plan, he would undoubtedly try to stop her, even against his better judgment.

Yuri understood why.

Unlike herself, who could transform into the Witchblade's wielder, Mishima was an ordinary man who had no means of protecting himself against trained Marines.

If he accompanied her to the American base, the odds were high that he would simply be throwing his life away.

No one could ask him to take such a risk.

Tomoyuki apologized once they returned to the car after agreeing on the plan.

"Sorry for lying to you, Tomoyuki. But this was the only way to protect everyone."

(He must already know I'm lying...)

Yuri silently thanked the boy as he kept his eyes on the road without saying a word.

Before long Mishima broke the silence.

"Yuri, Tomoyuki... are you ready?"

The undercover investigator immediately slowed the car.

The plan the two of them had devised was simple.

They would stop near the facility's perimeter fence, then Yuuri would rush in alone, transform, and create a diversion.

It was an enormous gamble.

They knew almost nothing about the enemy's defenses.

Even so, if she transformed, the Witchblade's power alone should be more than enough to carry out a mission of this scale.

As they drew closer, the Witchblade's core began to glow crimson.

Yuri felt the presence of the New Soldiers growing stronger.

Damn... just a little farther.

"What is it? The New Soldiers?"

Mishima noticed the change in her expression.

"Y-yes... Quite a lot of them."

"So, they're already moving. If they come after you after fighting the Cyber Soldiers, that would make a preemptive strike even more dangerous."

"I suppose... but we don't have much choice."

Mishima stepped on the accelerator.

Just as a three-meter-high security fence came into view, both of them noticed something strange.

The horizon ahead was glowing red with flames.

And mingled with the crackling of the fire came the distant echoes of gunfire and explosions.

Mishima instinctively brought the car to a stop and stared in disbelief.

"W-what...? Has another New Soldier gone berserk?"

Unable to wait any longer, Yuri threw open the door and leapt from the car.

As the Witchblade's bracelets flashed, black armor spread over her body.

The transformation surged through her with a violence she had never experienced before, every cell in her body crying out in agony.

The strain of the armor drained her strength, yet the moment the transformation was complete, an overwhelming sense of exhilaration swept through her.

"Are you all right, Yuri?"

"If I transform like this, I actually feel... wonderful. Ah... I can't wait to fight."

The girl's smile made Mishima shudder.

"I'll go on ahead. Just like you said, Tomoyuki will take care of everything."

From her right arm the Witchblade extended a longsword.

She sliced through the wire fence as effortlessly as paper.

A moment later, she tore open a hole nearly four meters across.

"Excuse me."

She sprinted toward the facility.

Watching her disappear, Mishima muttered,

"*I suppose there's no avoiding the tiger's den if you want the tiger cub...*"

Gripping the steering wheel again, he pressed down on the accelerator.

Yuri raced toward the burning buildings.

The grounds had become a vision of hell.

The bodies of Marines and shattered pieces of buildings lay scattered everywhere.

As his eyes swept across the wide runway, Mishima saw a New Soldier standing in the distance, both hands clamped around the throat of a Marine.

"Help me...!"

With frightening ease, the Cyber Soldier severed the Marine's neck.

"Gaaah! N-no! N-next, not me!"

Another New Soldier turned toward Yuri, roaring as it charged.

The blood-soaked blade that had just severed the Marine's neck came flashing toward the girl's throat.

Yuuri calmly thrust out the blade on her right arm.

From hip to shoulder, her sword bit cleanly through the New Soldier.

"Aaaagh!"

Ignoring its dying scream, Yuri drove the short sword on her left arm deep into its chest.

The Cyber Soldier froze.

She withdrew the blade from her right arm in a single motion, carving diagonally through its body.

At the same time, the Marine trapped in its grasp fell free.

More New Soldiers appeared, gathering around her like flies drawn to something sweet, showering sparks as they approached.

"So, it's not just one. This is even better."

Yuri smiled fearlessly beneath her dark armor.

"I might actually enjoy this."

Another New Soldier lunged at her.

The enemy had no idea that the girl who had only moments ago looked as though her body might be torn apart had already recovered enough to meet them head-on.

She had already begun to enjoy herself.

"Huh? What's this?"

She realized her left arm had become caught.

"*You want to see which of us is stronger? You're different from those brute-force New Soldiers I've fought before.*"

"Heh... I don't mind."

The New Soldier's chest split open, revealing the muzzle of a gun.

Yuri smiled.

So, it's a ranged model.

At this distance, there was no way it could pull back its arm in time to strike.

Ordinary bullets meant nothing to her.

"But that's too naive."

Planting one foot firmly on the ground, Yuri raised herself smoothly as though performing on a horizontal bar like a gymnast.

At that exact moment, she kicked upward in perfect sync with the New Soldier's movement, smashing the heel of her foot into the top of the Cyber Soldier's head.

The blow forced the New Soldier's grip to loosen.

In the same motion, Yuuri's right-arm longsword cleaved both the Cyber Soldier and the Marine it held cleanly in two.

"All right... who's next?"

As she turned to face the remaining New Soldiers, another presence suddenly brushed against her senses.

"...What?"

That's not another New Soldier... Something's different. Where...? Up above?

The facility wall exploded outward with a deafening roar.

From the cloud of dust that billowed through the gaping hole emerged a human silhouette.

Yuri stared, eyes wide with shock.

2.

The unexpected turn of events caught both Michael and Joseph completely off guard.

The Marines, who had been preparing to deploy, hurriedly mobilized and rushed out of the base.

Fortunately, the incident had occurred before anyone had been dispatched.

One Marine, thinking only that a Cyber Soldier had broken loose, immediately opened fire.

It was a disastrous mistake.

The bullets struck another Cyber Soldier just as it was about to leap into the fleeing vehicle, provoking it into a frenzy.

Before long, the New Soldiers began attacking one another.

The fighting spread outward from inside the facility toward the exterior.

Michael sprang to his feet.

"This isn't the time to stand around watching!"

"What's happening? Why are the New Soldiers going berserk?"

"Has the Witchblade user shown up?!"

One of the soldiers spun toward Michael, shouting.

When Michael looked at the monitor they pointed to, the screen clearly showed Yuri, transformed by the Witchblade.

"...I see. So that's what caused it. The Witchblade user moved before we did."

Joseph nodded in reluctant agreement.

If Michael keeps acting like everyone else, he'll lose his standing. Maybe this New Soldier data will finally give him the leverage he needs...

Just as Michael opened his mouth to speak—

"Colonel!"

A soldier burst into the monitor room.

"Wh-what now?!"

Michael snapped irritably.

"A prototype New Soldier has activated on its own!"

"What?!"

Even Joseph went pale at the report.

"That's impossible! It was under triple lockout! It can't activate by itself!"

But it was true.

A violent impact shook the facility.

On the monitor, a figure emerged from the smoke.

Its upper face was concealed beneath a helmet-like visor, hiding any expression.

Its entire body was encased in metallic armor.

Mounted on its right forearm was a 5.56 mm Gatling gun.

Its left arm housed a tri-drill unit.

Across its back rested a 20 mm anti-material rifle.

It looked like the humanoid combat robots from a Hollywood action film.

"...So that's it."

Joseph stared at the screen.

"The new prototype is actually functioning."

"Who removed its movement restraints...?"

One of the soldiers shook his head.

"No, sir. It wasn't released by anyone. It appears... the New Soldier itself wanted to be free."

Michael frowned.

"So, Joseph was right. The brain they used in the prototype must have awakened once the Witchblade began fighting."

"That's a plausible explanation."

The prototype New Soldier had been almost completely mechanized, leaving only its head and part of its skeletal structure intact.

Even so, there were limits.

Simply augmenting an ordinary human into a superhuman could never completely eliminate the vulnerability of the remaining biological components.

To overcome that weakness, this new prototype had been designed as a fully modular combat machine.

Its components could be swapped out according to the battlefield or the opponent, making it a truly versatile soldier.

It was the ultimate combat machine Michael and Joseph had long envisioned.

The existing New Soldiers also underwent repeated testing of various components, but their true objective had always been the creation of this fully mechanized New Soldier.

"...In other words, this new model brings together everything we've learned from developing the New Soldiers. It's the culmination of all our prototype machines."

"So this could be our chance to test the new model's capabilities. We weren't planning to activate the prototype today, but the equipment was built with Witch Blade combat in mind."

At Michael's words, Joseph folded his arms and gave a small nod.

The prototype projected onto the monitor suddenly fired the compact jet units mounted on its back. Closing the distance in an instant, it charged straight at Yuri, thrusting the high-speed triple drill mounted on its right arm toward her.

Yuri caught the spinning drill with the blade in her right hand.

But the force of the jets upset her balance.

The prototype New Soldier launched into the air without slowing, soaring upward. Mounted on its shoulder was an anti-material rifle—the same heavy weapon used by tanks—and it opened fire. The shells rained down from above.

Yuri noticed the attack too late.

The instant she looked up, the New Soldier's claws burst from behind her and slashed toward her back.

Realizing the danger, Yuri swung the oversized railgun sideways, intending to split her opponent in two.

The prototype anticipated the move. This time it brought up the assault rifle mounted on its arm and fired.

A burst of three shots struck Yuri before she could dodge. The impact hurled her backward across the ground.

"The damage doesn't seem too severe," Michael observed, "but it's obvious she stumbles every time she gets back on her feet. Even without sound, you can see the pain in her face."

Yuri transformed her hair into countless blades and launched them toward the enemy circling overhead.

The prototype escaped by climbing even higher.

"If she can't reach it up there..." Michael smiled with quiet satisfaction. "...then as long as we keep it above her head, it'll have free rein to attack. The Witch Blade may actually lose this."

He wasn't merely guessing.

The prototype's control computer was linked directly to its central processor, and Yuri's combat data had already been fed into it. Because of that, it could choose the most effective tactics against her without being affected by panic or excitement.

At close range it relied on the drill mounted on its left arm. At long range it used the anti-material rifle loaded with armor-piercing ammunition. While maneuvering through the air, it alternated between those weapons and the triple jet units with remarkable efficiency.

At first glance, the advantage seemed overwhelmingly to favor the prototype.

Even so, the prototype's small jet engines could not remain airborne forever. They consumed fuel, and once the engine quit, the machine would be forced back to the ground. Since it had never been designed with prolonged real-world combat in mind, the ammunition carried by both its anti-material rifle and assault rifle was also limited.

Of course, even on the ground the prototype still surpassed an ordinary New Soldier in speed and raw power.

Even so...

If Yuri loses the advantage she has now, what then? Michael could not suppress the unease creeping into his mind.

Perhaps it's about time...

Perhaps it was finally time to settle things with Joseph.

Long before Michael had become president of Cyber Develop, the two had known one another. Their interests had aligned, and they had maintained an amicable relationship—but nothing deeper than that. Friendship had never entered into it.

To Joseph, Camp Hosanna's commanding officer, the New Soldier was nothing more than a weapon to be developed and experimented upon in absolute secrecy, something that could serve as a bridge to military contracts.

Michael's goals had always been different.

He had wanted to earn enormous profits from selling New Soldiers, while also advancing his own company's research and eventually applying that knowledge to the restoration of NSWF.

Now that the new model had reached a practical level of completion, there was no longer any reason for him to continue working with Michael.

"I'll be stepping out for a moment."

After muttering these words, Joseph rose from his seat in the control room.

He returned to the room that had been assigned to him, stuffing his laptop and the accumulated research data into a travel bag.

Then, without attracting attention, he slipped quietly into the corridor.

The control room faced a small harbor carved out beneath the facility. While the battle continued aboveground, now was probably his best chance to escape.

As he cautiously peered down the hallway, he spotted a lone man standing there.

He wore sunglasses. Raising one hand casually, he smiled.

"Hello."

Joseph froze.

The face illuminated by the emergency lights stirred a faint memory.

"...You. Weren't you with the Witch Blade user...? Wait... who are you?"

"I'm a special investigator for the Cabinet Intelligence and Research Office. I tagged along while Yuri-kun was making all that commotion."

Joseph had heard that name before.

"The Cabinet Intelligence and Research Office...? But that's..."

"This is an American military installation. The authority of the Japanese government doesn't extend here."

"I know. That's why I've been carrying out my mission in complete secrecy."

The investigator answered so casually that it sounded as though he were discussing nothing more serious than neighborhood gossip.

Joseph Kitou reached inside his jacket for his pistol.

But the man in sunglasses moved faster.

He struck with a swift blow to the body and neck. The president of Cyber Develop lost consciousness instantly, his bag slipping from limp fingers and thudding to the floor.

"Good. He's secured... Yuri-kun, I just hope you're all right..."

With an anxious expression, Mishima looked up toward the ceiling.

3.

Tomoyuki raced toward the American military facility on his bicycle.

He had been on his way there from the moment he learned the truth.

When he glanced outside, he saw an explosion bloom in the direction of the base.

"...Yuri?"

The boy pedaled even harder, still wearing nothing but a long-sleeved shirt and shorts.

A shout burst from his lips.

"Yuri! Yuri! What are you doing?!"

More than anyone, she herself had to realize that her body was nearing its limit. Yet she continued hurling herself into the heart of the enemy forces.

"*Damn it...!*"

"I know I'm useless... I know I can't fight beside Mishima the way Yuri can..."

But even so...

"*Even so, I was with Yuri!*"

He slammed down on the pedals, pouring every ounce of strength into them.

By the time he reached the main gate of the facility, Tomoyuki finally braked in surprise.

From beyond the buildings, flashes of light and the thunder of explosions continued without pause.

"Th-They're seriously going at it... There have to be at least two people guarding the gate, but they're nowhere to be seen."

If he could slip in unnoticed, all he had to do was lock up his bicycle somewhere and make his way inside.

Ordinarily he would have hesitated at the idea of trespassing into a military base.

But this was no time to worry about something like that.

Leaving the bicycle behind, Tomoyuki sprinted toward the buildings.

The closer he drew to the heart of the facility, the more clearly the situation came into view.

Building after building had been blasted apart, black smoke billowing from every direction. Bodies of Marines and wounded soldiers lay scattered across the ground. It looked less like a military facility and more like a vision of hell.

For a split second he wondered if Yuri had done all this.

But a closer look revealed that many of the dead had been ripped apart or crushed beyond recognition.

This wasn't Witch Blade's work.

Among the wreckage lay countless shattered New Soldiers.

Then these must be the ones Yuri fought...

Just then he heard the shriek of jet engines tearing through the air.

Looking up, he saw a blazing silhouette illuminated by the flames.

"Huh...? That's..."

Focusing his eyes, he recognized the outline of a human-shaped flying machine.

"Is that... a New Soldier? No... what is it doing?"

The cyborg soldier suddenly aimed its assault rifle toward the ground.

A burst of fire.

Then, almost immediately, it soared back into the sky, jet engines roaring.

Tomoyuki tracked the movement with his eyes.

At first, he thought the New Soldier had found its target.

Then, a heartbeat later—

"Yuri?!"

No.

It wasn't a New Soldier at all.

The figure bathed in the glow of the flames was the girl clad in the Witch Blade.

At first glance she appeared unharmed, but the way her left leg dragged behind her made it obvious she had already suffered serious injuries. Her arms hung limply at her sides, nearly devoid of strength.

Bearing down on her from behind was a New Soldier wielding an enormous hammer, nearly as tall as a man.

Its arms were metallic, thick with mechanical power. Like a batter preparing to swing for the fences, the cyborg soldier drew the hammer back before whipping it sideways with terrifying speed.

The blow struck Yuri squarely in the abdomen.

She couldn't avoid it.

Her body folded into the shape of a bow as she was blasted into the air, a voiceless cry escaping her lips.

She flew dozens of meters, yet somehow managed to keep her footing when she landed.

The next instant, however, she coughed violently.

"Kh...!"

Blood spilled from the corner of her mouth.

Even protected by armor as durable as steel, she could not completely absorb the force of such a monstrous blow. The impact had reached her internal organs.

"...Now that one actually hurt," Yuri muttered, wiping the blood from her lips with the back of her hand.

Yet despite the pain, a faint smile still lingered on her face.

Is this what Witch Blade truly seeks?

Tomoyuki looked frantically around the battlefield.

He couldn't see any other New Soldiers.

The hammer-wielding cyborg and the airborne prototype appeared to be the last two remaining.

The New Soldier circling overhead raked the ground with bursts from its assault rifle.

Yuri barely managed to dodge the incoming fire.

But while she was pinned down, the hammer-wielding giant charged, raising its weapon high overhead.

If that hammer lands on her head...

Tomoyuki didn't dare finish the thought.

Without hesitation, Yuri threw herself straight at the charging brute.

As she passed, the blades extending from both her arms flashed outward.

They carved a brilliant cross through the cyborg's torso.

The hammer slipped from the New Soldier's hands.

It crashed onto the asphalt with a heavy metallic clang.

At almost the same instant, the prototype in the sky opened fire again with the anti-material rifle mounted on its shoulder.

Armor-piercing rounds punched clean through the giant cyborg's body, showering sparks as they tore out the far side.

Only one enemy remained.

Yet that final opponent was the most dangerous of all.

The prototype darted freely through the air, sniping from long range with its rifle. Whenever it found an opening, it swooped in with astonishing speed, attacking with the triple drill mounted on its left arm.

Tomoyuki knew all too well how terrifying the triple drill was. He had seen its destructive power with his own eyes before. Combined with the prototype's tremendous speed, it was an attack that even Yuri could not fully defend against.

To the naked eye her movements had visibly slowed.

The prolonged battle against the New Soldiers had accumulated both fatigue and injury.

Even the smile that had lingered on her lips was beginning to disappear.

And yet...

If Witch Blade truly desired nothing more than an endless battle, then perhaps this desperate situation was exactly what it wanted.

"Stop it...!"

Tomoyuki cried out.

"Please stop hurting Yuri, Witch Blade!"

His desperate plea was swallowed by the deafening roar of the prototype's jet engines.

Tomoyuki could no longer stand there and watch.

"*There has to be something... Some kind of weapon...*"

His frantic gaze swept across the battlefield until it fell upon a thick cylindrical object lying beside the body of a fallen soldier a short distance away.

"...An SRAW launcher?"

It was a portable missile launcher, less than a meter long.

Tomoyuki had never actually seen one in person before. Still, he had heard about military weapons from a friend who was obsessed with such things and had seen photographs often enough to recognize it immediately.

The SRAW was a shoulder-fired missile system intended for short-range engagements. It was designed for everything from anti-personnel combat to destroying armored vehicles and buildings.

"*That's it... This might actually work.*"

Unlike the Predator's missiles, the SRAW used a laser guidance system. As long as the target could be painted with a laser, even an ordinary person could score a hit.

Of course, it was meant for ground warfare. Whether it would work against an airborne enemy was another matter, and with an effective range of only about six hundred meters, using it against a fast-moving New Soldier at this distance was a gamble.

But if I can hit it... I might be able to bring that New Soldier down.

Clinging to that slender hope, Tomoyuki hefted the launcher onto his shoulder.

It weighed nearly nine kilograms.

Fortunately, the fallen soldier had apparently been killed before firing it, so the missile was still loaded.

I don't really know how to use this...

Still kneeling, he raised the launcher and centered the flying New Soldier in the sight.

"*Please... hit...*"

The moment he pulled the trigger, the launcher kicked violently against his shoulder with a deafening roar.

The missile streaked into the air.

The flying machine banked sharply toward Yuri in a straight-line attack.

Perhaps the prototype had noticed the missile only when it heard the launch. Without even turning around, it sprayed wildly with its assault rifle.

The missile exploded just short of its target.

Tomoyuki bit back a curse and threw aside the now-empty launcher.

"Damn it!"

One shot was all it had carried.

Even so, the attack had achieved something.

For the briefest instant, the New Soldier had been forced to break away from Yuri, climbing skyward to avoid the blast.

By the time it noticed, Yuri had already reached it.

Before the blade in her right hand could connect, however, the prototype sliced away the flight unit mounted on its own back.

The two severed jet engines exploded in midair, scattering burning fragments that lit the battlefield crimson.

Yuri dropped back to the ground amid a shower of burning debris.

Without missing a beat, the prototype spun the triple drill mounted on its left arm and answered with a three-round burst from its assault rifle. At the same time, it brought the long-barreled rifle on its right arm to bear, ready to fire the instant another opening appeared.

Unfortunately, the New Soldier's gunfire had already exhausted its ammunition.

"Good. Now the odds are even."

Tomoyuki clenched his fist.

"No... if this turns into close combat, Witch Blade has the advantage by a mile."

But the boy had no way of knowing that the prototype had already incorporated Yuri's combat data into its own systems.

Nor did he realize how much damage she had already accumulated.

The girl swept her right-hand blade through the air.

The strands of her hair transformed into countless razor-sharp blades, surging toward the New Soldier like a glittering storm.

The prototype responded almost unnaturally, slipping through the barrage with movements so precise they bordered on inhuman. Every attack pattern Yuri produced was analyzed the instant it appeared.

Only one assault remained impossible to evade completely—

the charge of the spinning triple drill.

The moment Yuri drew back her hair to strike again, the New Soldier matched her movement and lunged straight at her.

Yuri twisted backward in an attempt to avoid the attack.

She reacted a fraction too slowly.

The high-speed drill grazed her left shoulder.

The impact alone hurled her violently across the ground.

"...Come on... get closer... closer..."

Gasping for breath, Yuri slowly struggled back to her feet.

Yet the smile never left her lips.

Even now, the Witch Blade seemed to delight in the battle.

"*She's fighting this hard... and you're still not satisfied?*"

Tomoyuki's chest tightened with anger.

Yuri raised her blade once more.

The prototype answered by revving its drill like a boxer rolling his shoulder before a decisive punch.

She continued yielding ground little by little.

It was becoming obvious that she no longer had the strength to counterattack.

"*I have to help Yuri!*"

Before he even realized what he was doing, Tomoyuki had broken into a run.

An abandoned M4A1 carbine lying on the ground caught his eye.

He snatched it up without slowing and sprinted toward the New Soldier.

At that very instant—

the spinning drill closed in on Yuri's face.

Yuri raised her left arm just in time, catching the blow with the short sword mounted there.

Even so, the force of the impact drove her down onto one knee.

The prototype lifted its spinning drill for the finishing strike.

"*No! Get away from her!*"

Tomoyuki planted his feet and shouldered the M4A1.

The New Soldier squeezed the trigger.

Fortunately—or perhaps unfortunately—the prototype was now firing in full-auto mode. The bullets it had sprayed wildly while Tomoyuki dashed across the battlefield had already struck the machine itself, and now the rifle answered only with a dry, hollow clicking sound.

Just as the saying goes, "*Spray enough bullets and eventually you'll hit something.*"

But 5.56 mm rounds were incapable of inflicting meaningful damage on a New Soldier whose body was reinforced with metal.

The prototype abandoned Yuri altogether and shifted its attention to Tomoyuki.

Perhaps it had judged that an ordinary human carrying a firearm posed the greater threat than the Witch Blade user, who no longer seemed capable of standing.

Tomoyuki's own M4A1, however, had already run dry during the suppressive fire.

Now the New Soldier charged straight toward him, the triple drill screaming at impossible speed.

Tomoyuki instinctively squeezed his eyes shut, bracing himself for death.

The whine of the spinning drill suddenly stopped just before it reached him.

When he cautiously opened his eyes—

he saw Yuri's enormous Witch Blade sword thrust clean through the prototype from behind.

The girl had seized the machine's drilling arm, and with a movement like an athlete throwing a hammer, she hurled the New Soldier toward the sea.

It exploded just before striking the water.

Yuri then stumbled forward.

"Yuri... are you okay?"

Panting, Tomoyuki caught the collapsing girl in his arms.

"You idiot..." she murmured between ragged breaths. "...Tomoyuki... what were you thinking... coming here?"

"I couldn't just stand by while you fought alone."

At the boy's words, a faint smile touched Yuri's lips.

"...I'm sorry. Thank you for coming to save me."

As she spoke, the Witch Blade's armor peeled away piece by piece, revealing the girl beneath.

Her body looked frail, and the pain she had endured was evident.

"Hey! Yuri!"

A familiar voice called out.

Turning, Tomoyuki saw Mishima climbing down from a truck that had just driven out of the facility.

"Mr. Mishima!"

"Huh? Tomoyuki? What are you doing here?"

His reaction mirrored Yuri's.

Given the situation, it was only natural.

Tomoyuki carried Yuri over to Mishima.

"Are you all right, Yuri?"

"...I'm... fine. Just... a little tired."

Even as she forced her eyes open to answer, her voice was weak, the words fading in and out.

The exhaustion was obvious to anyone who saw her.

"It looks like the New Soldiers have finally been wiped out," Mishima said, glancing around at the devastated battlefield.

Tomoyuki nodded.

Just then, Mishima's eyes settled on a broad-shouldered man whose hands were bound behind his back.

"...Who is that?"

Tomoyuki pointed toward him.

"That's Joseph Kitou, president of Cyber Develop. We found him unconscious and brought him here. If we can make him talk, we'll probably learn how deeply the U.S. military was involved."

"I see..."

"Our objective's basically been accomplished. We've got the evidence, so there's no reason to stay here any longer. Let's get out of here."

Just as they were about to leave, something enormous suddenly burst through the shattered wall of a warehouse.

At first glance it looked like a tank.

More accurately, it resembled a self-propelled gun with its turret removed.

It was nearly four meters long, and with the height of its hull and turret combined, stood close to two meters tall.

Then everyone noticed the turret mounted at the front of the vehicle.

One large-caliber machine gun...

...and two six-cell missile pods.

Seeing it, Joseph's eyes flew open.

"That... that's an AAAV!"

"AAAV?" Mishima echoed in surprise.

"The next-generation amphibious assault vehicle?..."

The AAAV was an armored vehicle designed primarily to transport and protect Marines.

The U.S. Marine Corps currently fielded the AAV-7 and its variants, and the AAAV had been developed as its intended successor.

Camp Hosanna had apparently been conducting performance tests on the prototype as well as training soldiers.

Naturally, the AAAV's primary mission was troop transport, so its firepower did not rival that of a conventional main battle tank.

Even so, mounting a heavy machine gun and missile launchers made it an overwhelming threat to anyone without anti-armor weapons.

"Witch Blade! This is all your fault! You've ruined everything I've built! But I'm not finished yet! I'll hand you over to the military no matter what!"

The girl, still clinging to Tomoyuki's back, slowly opened her eyes as she heard Michael's voice.

"Michael! Sir... are you really going to betray me?!"

Joseph cried out in protest.

Originally, the Witch Blade research had been carried out in secret by Cyber Develop. Once the project reached a stage where it could be sold to the military for Michael's own protection, he had intended to divide the profits.

"Shut up! The one who betrayed me first was you! You planned to take all the credit for yourself and leave me behind!"

Ignoring Joseph's furious accusation, Michael replied only with a contemptuous grunt.

Yuri's crimson eyes flared brighter.

The girl slipped down from Tomoyuki's back.

"I'll finish this."

Even Tomoyuki could tell what was happening.

The Witch Blade was reacting to the overwhelming hostility pouring from the armored vehicle.

"Yuri, don't!"

He reached out to stop her.

Before he could, however, crimson light spread across the girl's body as the Witch Blade's armor engulfed her once more.

"Ah... aaah... ngh..."

Yuri trembled violently.

Though she was clearly in no condition to fight, the Witch Blade continued forcing the transformation upon her. Her body convulsed as if screaming in protest.

Even so, the girl smiled.

"Looks like... this is more fun now. All right... everyone, get inside the building. I'll deal with him."

Her voice was strained, almost delirious, but she still managed to speak.

"Yuri... don't push yourself."

"It's okay... Leave this to me."

She turned toward Tomoyuki with a gentle smile.

Her hair and eyes had changed color, yet beneath the armor the face that remained was unmistakably that of the frail young girl he knew.

Tomoyuki found himself unable to answer.

"Tomoyuki... protect everyone."

As Yuri had said, there was nothing the others could do against a weapon like that.

Taking Joseph with them, Tomoyuki and Mishima hurried toward the shelter of the nearby building.

"If you ever get your hands on the Witch Blade," Yuri called after them with a fearless smile, "kill me first. Then... come after him."

"I'm counting on you..."

With those final words, Yuri raised one hand in a taunting gesture toward Michael.

"Come on!"

Michael answered with a furious shout as the heavy machine gun erupted into life.

At the same time, the turret swung around.

What it launched this time was a guided missile.

The one-meter projectile curved through the air, altering its course as it pursued Yuri across the battlefield.

"Guided missile... That's going to be trouble."

Muttering to herself, Yuri sprinted directly toward the oncoming projectile.

In a single fluid motion, the blade extending from her right arm flashed.

The missile split cleanly in two.

But the brief hesitation proved costly.

The blast wave caught Yuri before she could escape.

"Ugh...!"

She cried out in pain as she was hurled violently across the ground.

Even so, she forced herself back to her feet almost immediately.

My body's getting slower...

The damage she had already sustained was beginning to rob her of her mobility.

At this rate... what will happen if I take a direct hit from the heavy machine gun or another missile?

Even if the Witch Blade itself survived, there was every chance **she** would not.

Before that could happen, she had to settle the fight.

Yuri broke into a sprint straight toward the amphibious assault vehicle.

Its heavy machine gun and missile launchers were devastating at long range, but they were poorly suited to close-quarters combat. If she could get inside its effective minimum range—

Just then, a hatch on the side armor snapped open, revealing a pair of small machine guns.

What?!

The twin barrels automatically tracked her movement.

"Wait—that's cheating!"

Yuri leapt sideways in alarm.

The machine guns, however, stayed locked on with flawless precision.

A torrent of bullets poured toward her.

"Kyah!"

She twisted desperately, narrowly avoiding a fatal hit.

But there was no time to breathe.

The missile pod rotated again.

Another guided missile launched almost immediately.

As Yuri transformed her violet hair into countless blades, the strands shot forward to intercept it.

The missile detonated several meters away.

Even at that distance, the shockwave blasted her backward, slamming her hard against the ground.

"Ghh..."

Her strength was fading.

Her body no longer responded the way she willed it to.

Under normal circumstances, even a battle tank would have posed no real challenge to a Witch Blade bearer.

But she had already reached her physical limit, and the accumulated damage from the battle against the New Soldiers refused to heal through sheer force of will.

She had finally reached the point where every wound was beginning to matter.

"*Hahahaha...! So, this is the end, Witch Blade?*"

Michael's triumphant laughter echoed across the battlefield.

Yuri winced.

"Damn it... Yuri!"

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Hearing both the explosion and Michael's voice, Tomoyuki could no longer restrain himself. He started to dash out from behind the building.

"Idiot! Get back here!"

Mishima grabbed him by the shoulder and yanked him back.

Just a second later, a burst of machine-gun fire ripped into the exact spot where Tomoyuki had been standing.

"N-... What was that...?"

Tomoyuki stared, dumbfounded.

"It was an AAAV-4... a prototype next-generation amphibious assault vehicle."

The vehicle mounted a **30 mm autocannon** as its main weapon, **two six-cell surface-to-surface missile pods**, and **7.62 mm machine guns** for close defense. Because it was amphibious, the vehicle normally kept the machine guns and missile pods retracted inside the armor.

"The president of Cyber Develop Corporation... Michael."

Mishima grimaced.

"As expected... it's the sentry guns. Trouble."

Tomoyuki frowned.

"Those things are probably using anti-personnel sensors. They'll automatically identify and attack anyone who isn't registered."

Joseph added grimly.

"Their performance is frightening. Tomoyuki, you've experienced it yourself."

Mishima's words made Tomoyuki go pale.

"You're right... They were trying to kill me... They were treating me just like Yuri and the Witch Blade..."

Michael would undoubtedly try to eliminate them all after destroying the Witch Blade.

"Please... save Yuri! I can't let her die!"

Tomoyuki pleaded desperately.

"But what are we supposed to do? We don't even have weapons. If those sentry guns target us, we're finished..."

Still...

I have to save Yuri.

"But..." Mishima hesitated.

"If we move where the armored vehicle can't see us, maybe..."

Tomoyuki shook his head.

"It won't work."

The internal affairs investigator had already told them as much.

"There isn't enough time."

As the three prepared to relocate, the sounds of machine-gun fire and missile explosions suddenly ceased.

"...Could it be..."

Tomoyuki's face turned pale.

Did they kill Yuri...?

As an investigator, he knew he shouldn't jump to conclusions, but he couldn't stop himself from imagining the worst.

"Come on!"

Mishima broke into a run.

Tomoyuki followed, anxiety knotting his stomach, while Joseph hurried after them.

Behind them came the heavy rumble of the AAAV-4.

"Damn... they've found us..."

The armored vehicle rolled out from behind the building.

"No... Yuri!?"

Michael's mocking voice blared from the loudspeaker.

"The Witch Blade doesn't have any fight left in her now. We could finish her off whenever we want... or maybe she's already dead."

Just then—

A figure leapt into the air.

Tomoyuki's eyes widened.

"Yuri!"

It was the girl clad in the Witch Blade armor.

Although much of her flesh had already been transformed into biomechanical armor, the jewel embedded in the back of her hand still shone with an intense crimson light.

Is she... still fighting...?

No—

She wasn't trying to escape.

As the armored vehicle's turret swung toward her, the long barrel of the 30 mm cannon belched fire.

But the shells were sliced apart through the air above her head.

The Witch Blade had already landed atop the vehicle.

"So that's it..."

Tomoyuki finally understood.

Even if a 30 mm cannon could punch through her body, lowering its barrel enough to shoot straight upward at an enemy standing on the roof would expose the vehicle's own armor—and its vulnerable sentry-gun mounts—to friendly fire.

"And besides..."

Mishima murmured.

"If Michael sticks his head out of the hatch now..."

Yuri would surely force her way inside.

Realizing the danger, the AAAV suddenly accelerated, spinning sharply and swerving violently in an attempt to shake the girl loose.

Above, Yuri struggled to keep her footing.

"Yuri! Hang on!"

Tomoyuki shouted.

Already at the limit of her strength, she barely managed to cling to the armored hull. Her arms were trembling, and several times she nearly lost her grip before wrenching herself back into place.

Even so, he still hadn't reached the girl.

"Yuri! Hold on!"

Tomoyuki shouted.

Yuri answered with a faint nod.

The Witch Blade's crimson armor pulsed brighter.

Then—

Its countless crimson strands burst outward once more, lashing across the armored vehicle like living whips.

"What...?!"

Michael gasped.

The strands wrapped themselves around the rotating turret, locking it firmly in place.

"It can't move...!"

The 30 mm cannon struggled against the bindings, its servomotors whining as they strained in vain.

Yuri didn't give it the chance to recover.

The crimson strands tightened.

With a deafening shriek of tearing metal, the turret's rotation mechanism snapped apart.

"No way...!"

Michael's voice cracked with disbelief.

The cannon sagged lifelessly to one side.

At the same instant, Yuri leapt.

She landed directly atop the command hatch.

The crimson blades extending from her arms stabbed downward in a single decisive strike.

The reinforced hatch groaned.

Metal buckled.

Cracks raced across its surface.

Michael's confident smile finally vanished.

"...Impossible."

Inside the vehicle, alarms began to sound.

Yuri raised her arm once more.

One more blow—

One more strike, and the hatch would give way.

"It's over... Die, Witch Blade!"

The instant Michael shouted, four giant missiles fired simultaneously from the pods mounted on either side of the turret.

I can't dodge all of those in my condition...

No! I can't lose here—not when everyone is counting on me!

If I'm defeated, Tomoyuki and Mishima will be killed too. I can't let that happen. Never.

The moment the thought crossed her mind, the light gathering in Yuri's palm flared brighter, and a new strength surged through her body.

The missiles streaked toward the girl all at once.

Yuri cried out as she hurled herself forward, forcing her aching muscles into motion. Agony shot through every inch of her body, but she ignored it. Without slowing, she slipped cleanly through the narrow gaps between the four incoming missiles.

An instant later, the missiles slammed into the ground where she had been standing, erupting in explosions behind her.

As if responding to her thoughts, the sentry gun gripped in Yuri's hand automatically transformed itself into a bazooka.

Without pausing to unleash the seven 20 mm cannon rounds loaded in the weapon, Yuri shouted,

"Take this back!"

and threw the missile in her hand toward the AAAV-142.

Having completely lost sight of the girl, the armored vehicle was still aiming its gun straight ahead. Yuri dropped toward the ground, evading the direct fire from the sentry gun.

Joseph's suspicion had been correct: the sentry gun was relying on its anti-personnel sensors. It remained locked onto the falling girl, leaving it completely vulnerable to the incoming missile.

The missile struck the sentry gun on the vehicle's right rear.

A violent explosion followed, blasting a huge hole through the heavy armor of the armored vehicle. No matter how advanced the machine, even its own armor could not withstand the penetrating power of an anti-tank missile.

The AAAV-142 lurched to a complete stop.

Fighting the waves of searing pain coursing through her body, Yuri clenched her strength and extended a blade from her right arm.

Then, using the smoke and flames billowing from the gaping hole in the vehicle's right rear armor as cover, she circled around to the blind spot behind the sentry gun, now crippled by the explosion, while another burst of thirty-millimeter cannon fire rained after her.

Yuri kept weaving left and right to avoid the incoming fire. The damaged vehicle could no longer move its turret as quickly as before, allowing her to evade the shells by the narrowest of margins.

At last, she slipped beneath the armored vehicle.

Now even the thirty-millimeter cannon can't touch me.

With a fierce cry, Yuri drove the lock blade deep into the armor.

Then she cut through the cable leading to the tank track, and slashed open what appeared to be the fuel line beneath the hull.

Fuel poured out in a torrent, spreading across the ground.

"Oh no! Witch Blade's underneath it!"

"Hurry! Get out of there! It's going to explode!"

Michael's frantic voice crackled over the loudspeaker.

But his warning never reached Yuri.

It's over...

My battle... my purpose...

Before she could finish the thought, the fuel scattered across the ground ignited from the sparks raining down from the vehicle.

"...There's no time."

Yuri sprang backward.

At the very same instant, the next-generation amphibious armored vehicle carrying Michael erupted in a massive explosion.

The strength drained from Yuri's body, and she collapsed where she stood.

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"Yuri! Are you all right?"

Tomoyuki rushed over to her.

But one look told him she was far from unharmed. She had exhausted every ounce of strength she possessed in that battle. Even standing seemed beyond her now.

Aside from her face, the Witch Blade armor covering her body had almost completely dissolved. The jewel set in the gauntlet flickered weakly, its light dimming with every pulse, as though it had entered some abnormal state.

Supporting the girl in his arms, Tomoyuki spoke gently.

"Yuri. Hold on. The battle's over. You don't have to transform anymore."

"...Yeah..."

Still struggling to catch her breath, Yuri could only manage that brief reply.

The truck carrying Joseph finally arrived.

"Hey, are you all right? We brought this truck for Yuri."

One of the sunglasses-wearing men called out while turning the steering wheel.

Joseph immediately climbed down from the truck.

Without a word, he lifted Yuri into the vehicle.

At that moment, Tomoyuki heard the sound of an engine descending from the sky.

Looking up uneasily, he saw a military transport aircraft approaching.

Not an ordinary airplane.

No...

It was the unmistakable roar of military aircraft.

Tomoyuki could feel something approaching.

"Tomoyuki, Yuri, Joseph—they're all here."

Mishima emerged from the shadow of a building in search of Tomoyuki and the others. Halfway there, however, one of the investigation team's men suddenly leapt to his feet with a strange, frantic cry.

"Wh-what the...?!"

"What is it? What's wrong...?"

Tomoyuki hurried over to look. The moment his eyes fell upon what had appeared before them, he froze in disbelief.

Rising from the middle of the runway was a colossal object—several meters across and well over ten meters tall. Its smooth surface resembled a giant egg. Yet thick pillars protruded from here and there, giving it the appearance of some enormous rack-like structure.

As if those massive supports were lifting it from below, the gigantic object slowly rose higher and higher under its own power before coming to a halt.

Joseph's face went pale the instant he saw it.

"No... Michael's crazy. Did he really intend to use **that**...?"

Mishima frowned.

"Fuel-air explosive...? They developed a new bomb based on fuel-air explosives... and Michael built it just for this occasion?"

A fuel-air explosive is a weapon that disperses a cloud of flammable fuel before igniting it. The resulting detonation—known as a **fuel-air explosion**—produces an immense blast wave and intense heat, giving it extraordinarily destructive power.

"How powerful is it?"

"No one knows for certain," Mishima replied. "They've never actually detonated one. But simulations predict that a single blast would devastate everything within a **thirty-kilometer radius**. The blast effects could extend to roughly **twice** that distance."

Deathly pale, Joseph murmured,

"Thirty kilometers...? Then this entire island is inside the blast zone!"

Watanabe Island was only about eight kilometers from north to south and four kilometers from east to west. With a thirty-kilometer radius, not only the island itself but

even the neighboring islands would be swallowed by the explosion. The blast could even reach parts of Okinawa's main island, thirty kilometers away.

The thought alone was horrifying.

"Wait... Aren't fuel-air explosives normally dropped from aircraft and detonated in midair? That's supposed to produce the greatest effect. Even if the island is this large, can it really unleash that kind of destructive force?"

The Japanese-American man shook his head.

"No... that's no ordinary fuel-air bomb. It's a mass made up of **well over a hundred individual fuel-air charges**. When the time comes, they'll disperse over a wide area and detonate in a chain reaction. That's why it's become so much more powerful than previous designs. If that thing goes off, every human being, every animal, every living creature on this island will be annihilated."

The Camp Futenma commanding officer, who had been listening in stunned silence, finally found his voice.

"Is there any way to stop it?"

"No."

Joseph's answer came immediately.

"The control switch is still in Michael's hands. Unless someone can take it from him and get off this island before it's activated... But that's impossible. At this point, we're all as good as dead."

He glanced at the Japanese-American man.

"How much time is left before it detonates?"

The man looked down at the timer strapped to his wrist.

"About three minutes."

Silence fell over the group. None of them could think of a single way out.

In peacetime, aircraft could have taken off from the Japanese military airfield on the island, but now the runway was littered with collapsed buildings, shattered vehicles, the bodies of Marines and New Soldiers, and countless other obstacles. A gigantic bomb sat squarely in the middle of it all. Rescue helicopters would have no place to

land, and evacuating everyone by helicopter in the few minutes that remained was impossible.

"We have to do something... At this rate, not just us, but everyone on the island..."

Tomoyuki looked from one member of the investigation team to another.

"But... there isn't enough time. Even if we could somehow locate the bomb's control system and disable it, we'd never make it before it detonated. Honestly, the odds are hopeless."

The usually composed man drew a slow breath.

"Michael's last move was a brilliant checkmate. I hate to admit it... but he understood exactly what he was doing."

At those words, Tomoyuki and the others turned around.

Supporting herself against the wall of a nearby building, Yuri had climbed down from the truck. Her legs trembled so badly she looked as though she would collapse if she took even a single step.

"Yuri! You shouldn't be trying to fight anymore! With your body in that condition..."

Tomoyuki hurried to her side, reaching out to steady her.

But Yuri gently brushed his hand away.

"I've already lost. I don't have any chance of saving this island anymore. Go ahead... finish me."

"What are you talking about?! How could anyone expect you to defeat something like that? No matter how powerful the Witch Blade is—"

Yuri lifted her eyes to meet his.

The quiet resolve in them stopped him cold.

"Tomoyuki... you said you wanted to protect everyone on this island, didn't you?"

"I did. Of course I did! That's why—"

"Then don't say you'll give up while I'm still alive."

Her words struck him like a physical blow.

For a moment, Tomoyuki stared blankly at the girl before him.

Then he realized it once more.

How deeply Yuri cared for him.

And how determined she was to protect him, no matter the cost.

"...Hah... haaah..."

Supporting the boy who had collapsed unconscious, Yuri caught him before he could fall forward.

"I'm sorry, Tomoyuki. But... I don't think there's any other way."

She turned to one of the investigators who had approached them.

"Please take Tomoyuki with you. I don't think it's possible to stop the explosion anymore. Take the vehicle and get as far away as you can."

Realizing at last what she intended to do, Mishima stared at the frail girl carrying the unconscious boy on her back.

"Yuri... I'm sorry. There's nothing more I can do..."

Yuri shook her head gently and smiled—a smile as though every burden had suddenly fallen away.

"I'm happy. If I can do anything at all before I die—if I can give my life to protect this island—then please... go. Hurry."

Without another word, Mishima slung his bag over one shoulder, took Tomoyuki from Yuri's back, and carried him toward Joseph's utility vehicle.

Because he had dropped the bag in the rear seat earlier, the vehicle had escaped the battle undamaged.

Joseph climbed into the passenger seat with the unconscious boy, while Mishima slid behind the wheel. He started the engine, spun the steering wheel sharply, and floored the accelerator.

The utility vehicle carrying Tomoyuki sped away.

Yuri watched it disappear into the distance, her thoughts in turmoil.

As she absently touched her lips, she could still feel the lingering warmth of the boy's kiss.

I already decided, didn't I?

I decided to give my life to protect the one I love... and to protect Watanabe Island.

But how could she bear never seeing him again?

No... I can't think like that.

I have to save everyone.

She fixed her gaze on the glowing core set into the gauntlet on the back of her hand and concentrated.

A crimson radiance grew steadily brighter, and fresh power surged through her body.

Yet she sensed no strength flowing into the flesh that had already begun to crumble away. Even the color of her hair remained unchanged. Perhaps the girl had only a little life left to give.

Even so... if I can at least reach that bomb...

Pouring every ounce of her remaining strength into her legs, Yuri broke into a sprint.

As she drew closer to the bomb, a harsh metallic sound echoed across the island with startling clarity.

The bomb had begun to move. Its mechanisms were already running.

There wasn't much time left.

Yuri looked down once more at the glowing core in her hand.

"Witch Blade... I know you understand what I'm thinking. Please... lend me your strength. Give me the power to defeat our strongest enemy."

Whether it was merely Yuri's own determination reflected back at her, or the true will of the Witch Blade itself, she could not tell.

But the living weapon, which transformed itself to suit the needs of battle, responded exactly as she had wished.

A mass of silvery, mercury-like liquid spilled from the gauntlet on the back of her hand. It spread around the bomb, as though weaving a cocoon of gleaming threads.

An indescribable sensation welled up within Yuri.

Ah... this feels wonderful...

It was a pleasure unlike any she had ever known.

The fear of death melted away.

Instead, for the first time since leaving her homeland, her heart began to race with anticipation.

Yuri looked once more at the glowing core embedded in the back of her gauntlet.

The uneasiness and fear of death that had weighed on her heart moments before vanished completely. Instead, she found herself enveloped in a sweet sense of ecstasy, like a child about to set off on a long-awaited journey for the very first time.

The Witch Blade's will—or perhaps its instinct as the ultimate weapon forged to overcome powerful enemies—had become one with Yuri's own.

Her consciousness was no longer clouded. Rather, it felt as though her mind and the Witch Blade had merged into a single whole being.

Part of her understood that this meant she herself was disappearing, consumed by the Witch Blade's will, leaving behind only its instinct to destroy.

Even so, it was an undeniable fact that the cocoon enveloping the gigantic bomb continued to gather power.

The heat surging through her body spread even to her brain.

This really is amazing... I never imagined it could feel this good.

Pleasure unlike anything she had ever experienced overwhelmed her, until she no longer felt as though she were herself.

Somewhere deep within the haze of her fading consciousness, the smiling face of a sunburned boy appeared.

The boy who had always stayed by her side, worrying about her, encouraging her.

The one she loved.

His image flickered like an illusion in the depths of her heart before slowly fading away.

Goodbye... Tomoyuki...

Tomoyuki, slumped in the back seat of the utility vehicle, thought he heard the girl's voice whispering to him.

Slowly, he regained consciousness.

"H-Huh...? Mishima... Yuri...?!"

Mishima kept both hands firmly on the steering wheel without answering.

They were driving at well over a hundred kilometers per hour, and the American military facility was already far behind them. There wasn't even enough time to spare a reply.

Joseph unfastened his seat belt and twisted around to look through the rear window.

At that moment, an orange pillar of light shot skyward in the distance.

"There...!"

Mishima finally brought the vehicle to a stop.

All three men turned to look behind them.

The column of light pierced the heavens, bathing the surrounding landscape in a fiery glow.

What unfolded before them was almost dreamlike.

Leaving Joseph in the vehicle, Mishima and Tomoyuki stepped outside and stood transfixed, staring at the pillar of light piercing the heavens.

Almost immediately, a tremendous roar and a violent tremor like an earthquake rolled beneath their feet.

Yet strangely, there was no accompanying blast.

Gradually, the pillar of light faded, the trembling of the earth subsided, and silence returned to the night.

"...Yuri..."

Mishima bit his lip and slowly closed his eyes, unable to speak.

Seeing his expression, Tomoyuki somehow understood what had happened.

"...Uwaaaaaah...! Yuri!!"

The boy's grief-stricken cry echoed hollowly through the darkness.

Epilogue

That night, when Mishima reached the shoreline, he found a lone figure standing there.

There was no one else in sight.

Out on the sea, a line of boats—including the *Harley*, the climactic vessel from the Nirai Kanai Festival—moved silently across the water with their lights shining.

A short distance farther away, several work boats floated at anchor, apparently engaged in some kind of operation.

The figure simply stood there, watching them in silence.

"...You've finally come, Tomoyuki."

At Mishima's call, the figure turned around.

"Oh... it's been a while, Mishima."

"You've grown, haven't you? It's already been over a year..."

Standing beside the boy, Mishima studied his face.

The childish features he had known were gone. In their place was the face of a young man who had matured considerably.

"I should have come sooner. The truth is, I wanted to. But I had other assignments and couldn't get away."

"I know. Besides... everything involving the New Soldiers and the Witch Blade has been classified anyway."

The incident at Camp Futenma, which had claimed so many lives, was officially reported as an explosion caused by a fire breaking out in an ammunition depot.

Because the blast was so immense that parts of the island itself had collapsed into the sea, it gave rise to all manner of speculation. In the end, however, the deaths of Michael Fines and the extensive damage to the surrounding area remained one of the greatest unsolved mysteries.

"The truth is almost the opposite."

Mishima looked out over the sea.

"The joint Japanese-American investigation concluded that Michael deliberately set fire to the ammunition depot and destroyed the evidence before taking his own life. That's the official explanation."

Tomoyuki listened in silence.

"It wouldn't be strange if you found that hard to believe. But without the New Soldiers... and without the Witch Blade... there was no other way to explain what happened."

The New Soldiers recovered from Camp Futenma were turned over to the United States, where they were dismantled and analyzed.

Cyber Develop Corporation, the company Michael had headed, was dissolved several months later after widespread corporate misconduct came to light. Rumor had it that

the U.S. Special Weapons Force had exerted considerable pressure behind the scenes, but the details were never made public.

As one incident followed another over the course of the next year, Camp Futenma gradually faded from people's memories.

Even among those involved in intelligence work, the case was spoken of less and less. Joseph Kitou, of course, never forgot it—but he had no intention of burdening Tomoyuki with the whole truth. To him, it was simply another painful memory best left in the past.

The New Soldiers.

The Witch Blade.

Little by little, even those names disappeared into the darkness of history.

The lack of any photographs or video evidence made it easy enough to keep the incident quiet.

"We had no choice. There wasn't even a body. She must have realized she was going to die, so she vanished where no one would ever find her."

Even so, Yūri's hospital room still contained her will—and a letter describing Witchblade. The only reason it could not simply be destroyed without anyone seeing it was because of Mishima.

After the recovery operation, Tomoyuki showed the girl's final letter to her parents, but they never learned that such a letter had existed.

"Come to think of it, Tomoyuki-kun, you'll be staying on the island after graduating from high school, won't you?"

"Yeah. I heard something from one of the islanders before. I've decided to stay here and wait for Yūri to come back."

"...What? But Yūri..."

Ignoring Mishima's surprise, the boy continued quietly.

"To me, Yūri never really died. Maybe she's still alive somewhere. And if that's true... then someday she'll come back to this island. I just can't help believing that."

In reality, not even a fragment of Witchblade—or of the girl's body—had ever been found. Given the scale of the explosion, it was entirely possible that even her bones

had been obliterated. Yet, with no remains, no one could say with absolute certainty that there was no chance she had survived.

After all, she had been wearing the Witchblade, the so-called **ultimate weapon**. Perhaps something beyond ordinary understanding had happened.

"Yūri always said she loved this island. No matter where she went, she'd come back someday. If I hadn't been on the island then, I would've regretted it forever. That's why I'm going to stay here and wait."

"I see..."

Mishima could not find anything more to say.

He understood how desperately the boy wanted to believe that the girl he loved had survived. Yet that hope was so painfully optimistic that Tomoyuki probably knew, deep down, it was futile.

Still, there was one thing Mishima kept to himself.

On this island, the Nirai Kanai Festival was said to be not only **the place where the souls of the dead returned**, but also **the place where new life arrived**.

Whether that was merely an old legend... no one could say for certain.

"If that's true... then maybe it's possible."

Mishima looked away from the boy and out toward the line of workboats, their lamps glowing offshore.

"Could that be one of the survey vessels from Dōshijū Industries? They're probably investigating the geology of the area damaged by the explosion."

Dōshijū Industries was one of Japan's largest multinational corporations, centered on military manufacturing.

Ever since the Witchblade incident came to light, the company had become involved in the aftermath. After the remains of Camp Tozana were returned to Japanese custody, one of its investigation teams had been dispatched to the area.

"So, they're investigating Witchblade...?" the boy murmured.

Mishima gave a faint, bitter smile.

"The official reports about Witchblade have been placed under the highest level of secrecy. Of course, Mishima Motors knows about it—but so does the new Prime

Minister. It seems even he can no longer access the full files. It's almost as though someone is trying to bury the entire affair so completely that no trace of it will remain."

Of course, Mishima could not say for certain. But there were persistent rumors that somewhere behind the scenes existed an organization with enough influence to erase even an incident of this magnitude from history.

An organization with its own intelligence network, capable of learning that Witchblade had appeared, and perhaps even conducting its own investigation into the matter.

If such an organization truly existed, then it too had surely been drawn into the disaster caused by Witchblade.

The thought was enough to send chills down his spine.

Thinking about it now, perhaps the investigators who had spent nearly a year examining the site would ultimately conclude that it was best to seal away the existence of Witchblade forever.

For the sake of preserving the secret of the "ultimate weapon," a single young girl's precious life had been sacrificed.

Anyone who learned the truth could only come to the same conclusion.

"Well... I'd better get going. Tomoyuki, take care of yourself."

After gazing out over the sea for another moment, the special investigator gave the boy a casual salute.

"My name isn't Mishima Hiroo anymore."

With that, he cast aside the identity of "Mishima Hiroo" and walked away to begin a new assignment under a different name.

He would probably never meet Tomoyuki again.

Feeling a quiet pang of loneliness, the boy watched him leave.

Around that same time, aboard one of Dōshijū Industries' recovery vessels, work was proceeding at full speed.

A middle-aged captain stepped out onto the deck and called to a well-built man in an expensive suit who was watching the recovery operation.

"Mr. Takayama."

Takayama was still only in his mid-twenties, yet he had already been appointed project leader for this operation by the company's headquarters.

"So, headquarters has finally approved the withdrawal. The paperwork will be finished by tomorrow, so after that we'll head back to Tokyo."

"I understand."

Takayama nodded briefly.

The captain himself had not been told the details of the operation. He had received only a single instruction:

"Find Gauntlet."

He had spent nearly a year directing the survey of the surrounding seabed and terrain. The ordinary crew had never been told the operation's true objective, so that was as much as they knew.

Over the course of that year, the coastline devastated by the explosion had been thoroughly searched.

Yet there was still no sign whatsoever of the object they sought.

Apparently, headquarters had finally accepted that reality, and the withdrawal order had at last been issued. Even Takayama's direct superior—fifteen years older than he was—had traveled here personally to complete the final paperwork.

Outwardly, the man remained calm and composed.

But Takayama could tell that he was unable to hide the disappointment behind his expression.

"Still, I never thought headquarters would spend this much money and manpower searching for the Gauntlet."

When the captain remarked on it, Takayama answered without taking his eyes off the sea.

"It's a top-secret project. Besides, now that they haven't found it, there's no need for us to know anything more. As long as we get paid, that's all that matters."

"Fair enough."

With a shrug, the captain turned to head back inside the ship.

Just then, something caught his eye.

Far ahead, on the stern rail of one of the workboats anchored several dozen meters away, something appeared to be perched there.

At first glance it looked no more than a thick stick.

But when he looked more carefully, it resembled a person's forearm.

"Mr. Takayama... what's that?"

Takayama immediately walked over when the captain called him.

"What is it?"

"It's dark, so I can't make it out clearly. Could you shine your flashlight over there?"

Following the direction the captain pointed, Takayama swept the beam across the target.

There, unmistakably, hung the Gauntlet.

A crimson jewel embedded in the back of the metal glove gleamed faintly, as if it had climbed out of the sea of its own accord and come to rest upon the ship's railing.

Takayama's eyes widened.

For an instant, pure astonishment froze across his face.

"Hey! Contact the other ship immediately! Tell them we've found it... the Witchblade! Recover it at once!"

Receiving the young project leader's urgent orders, the captain spun on his heel and sprinted toward the bridge.

The Witchblade had suddenly appeared, as though it had been waiting for Takayama to arrive.

It was almost as if it already knew the destiny that awaited it...

...and had chosen to move toward that fate of its own will.

—End—

Afterword

Nice to meet you, everyone.

My name is **Satoshi Ichikawa**, and through a fortunate series of circumstances I was given the opportunity to write this novel adaptation.

I hope you enjoyed the story. As its author, I can think of no greater reward than knowing you found something in these pages that stayed with you after you finished reading.

Many of you probably already know this, but **Witchblade** was originally an American comic book series published by one of the country's leading comic publishers.

The concept of **"the ultimate weapon imbued with the will to fight"** was adapted by GONZO's talented production staff into the television anime *Witchblade*, which most readers are likely familiar with. The manga adaptation, illustrated by **Kobayashi Yasuko**, also contributed to expanding the series, and I believe many readers have enjoyed that version as well.

With this novel, I had the privilege of joining that growing family of works.

The heroine of this story is **Yūri Miyazono**, a frail young girl who becomes the bearer of Witchblade—the most powerful weapon in history, one endowed with its own will. Through her, I wanted to explore the duality born from possessing overwhelming power while standing face to face with death, the conflict between consciousness and instinct, and the cruel destiny that ultimately consumes her. Those themes became some of the central pillars of this story.

From the moment I began writing, both the anime and the manga were already underway. One of the greatest challenges was deciding how this novel should distinguish itself while remaining faithful to the world and its characters.

Both versions had their own unique strengths—not only in the heroine herself, but throughout the entire cast—and that gave the project tremendous appeal. In fact, the idea of placing Witchblade in the hands of a sickly young girl was warmly received by everyone involved, especially the staff at Top Cow.

At first I worried the concept might be so unconventional that people would dismiss it as little more than a gimmick. Instead, hearing such positive reactions was incredibly reassuring.

Within the Japanese version of *Witchblade*, there exists an organization known as **NSWF**, and I decided to weave that group into the story as a key part of the narrative. Naturally, this novel also follows that same continuity.

Because of that, events and characters appear that could never exist in a completely standalone original work. Along the way I also included small references linking the manga and anime timelines together, and toward the end even had Takayama make an appearance.

For that reason, after finishing this novel, I highly recommend watching the anime as well.

Following the great disaster, the appearance of Dōshijū Industries, the meeting between Takayama and Reina, and Reina's escape—if you watch the anime's very first episode afterward, I think you'll discover a number of details that suddenly take on new meaning.

Of course, I also wrote this novel so that it could be enjoyed entirely on its own.

However, if you've already read the manga and know the events of the anime, I believe you'll find yourself appreciating the world of *Witchblade* on an even deeper level.

Likewise, I imagine very few readers have experienced only one version without seeing the others. If you haven't yet, I strongly encourage you to do so. You may discover entirely new ways of looking at this story.

I would also like to express my heartfelt gratitude to everyone at **Top Cow**, to the anime production staff, and to all the people who worked alongside me throughout this project. I owe special thanks to **Uno Makoto**, the chief character designer and supervising animation director, whose wonderful illustrations—even down to the cover and interior artwork—gave life to this novel.

Finally, I offer my deepest thanks to everyone at **GONZO**, whose generosity and support made it possible for me to write this book, and to the anime staff, whose kindness and cooperation I will always remember.

And above all, I would like to thank every reader who has picked up this novel.

If reading it has encouraged you to explore the Japanese *Witchblade* franchise as a whole—including the anime and the manga—then I could ask for nothing more.

July 2006

Satoshi Ichikawa